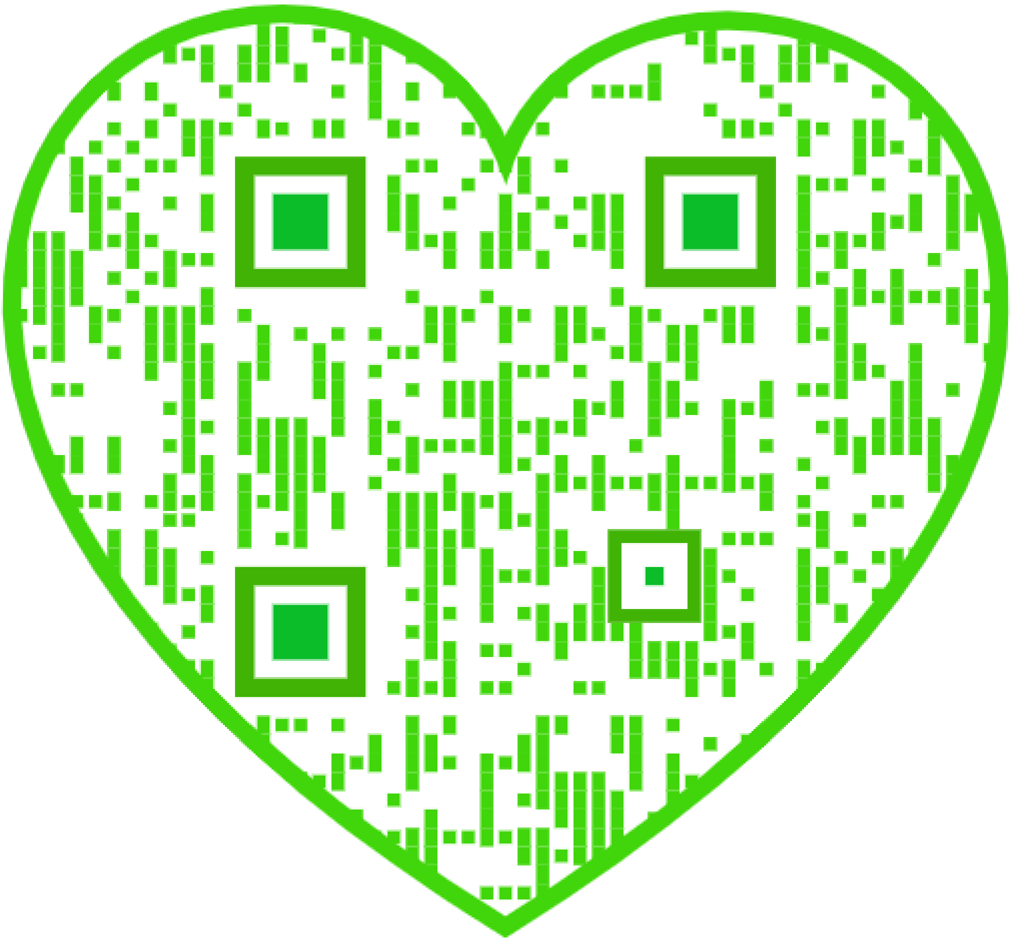
THE LIFE OF MICHAEL GARDNER

Alpinist 89

MARY EDEN **FINDS UNLIKELY ROUTES**
ROBBIE PHILLIPS **EXPLORES ST. KILDA**
JILL WHEATLEY **RE-ENVISIONS HER LIFE**
DIDIER BERTHOD **GRASPS REDEMPTION**

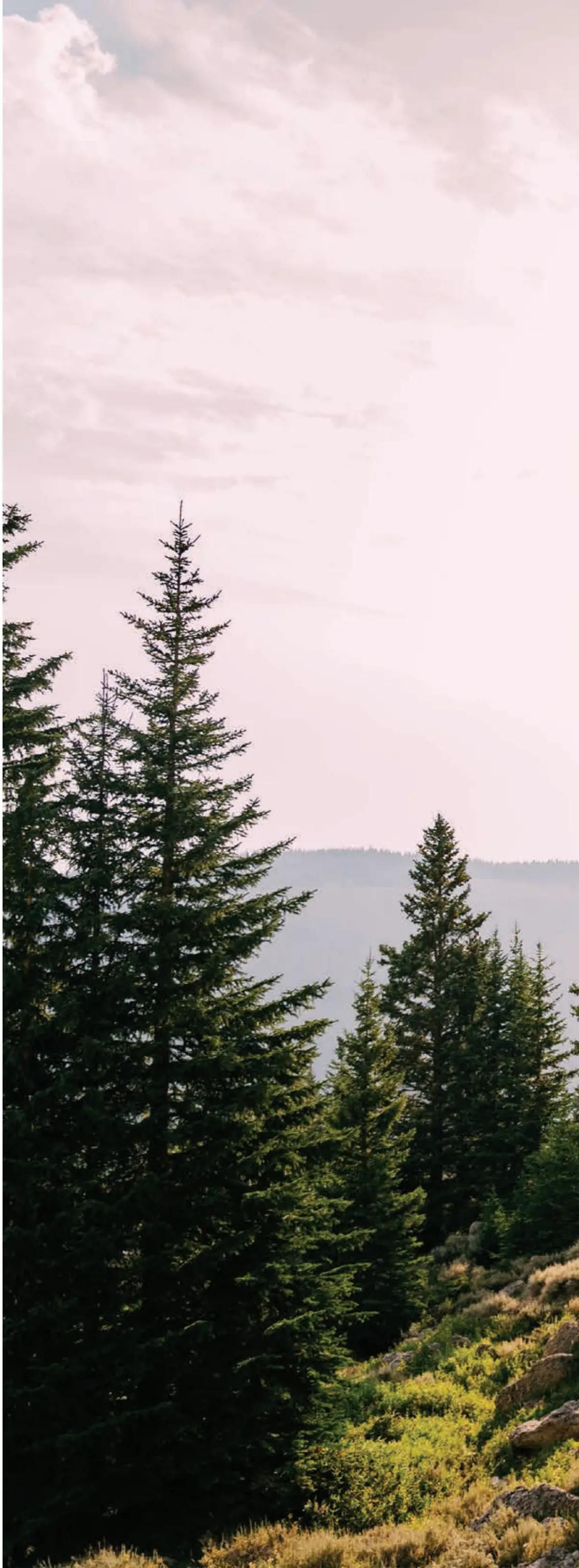


“When I’m on-route, I’ll often rest an ice axe on my shoulder if I’m placing protection or switching hands. The Torre Egger’s durability means I don’t have to worry about damaging the material.”

On a different level.

THE NORTH FACE
FAY MANNERS // ALPINIST
THE NORTH FACE® ATHLETE
SUMMIT SERIES™

📷 Tim Rorke on *Martini Action* (5.12b) at The Fallen Block, Wyoming. *AAC member Eric Fallecker*



United *WE* Climb.

At the AAC—the largest Club of climbers in the country—our members connect around a shared passion for climbing, advocacy for climbing areas, and educational resources to keep each other safe.

Join us in this mission and you'll also receive the *American Alpine Journal, Accidents in North American Climbing*, and the emergency rescue and medical expense coverage you need to dream big.

Learn more at americanalpineclub.org.

American Alpine Club

Ambassador Christina Lusti and skier Guillaume Pierrel
Aoraki, Mt. Cook, New Zealand

YETI
BUILT FOR THE WILD.

FEATURES

ALPINIST | SPRING 2025 | MAPACHE STYLE

50 In the Shadow of the Grand

The world-renowned alpinist Michael Gardner guided Brendan Jones up the Grand Teton in 2022. The two kept in touch with plans for Jones to write a magazine profile about Gardner's wild and unusual life. Meanwhile, Gardner continued to climb new lines, ski first descents and set speed records on Denali's hardest routes. Tragically, he fell to his death and disappeared while attempting to complete the first ascent of Jannu East (7460m) in Nepal with Sam Hennessey last October. Jones' story has become a reflection that looks into the lives of the Gardner family.

70 Cobra Crack

In 2005, Didier Berthod was emerging as one of the top rock climbers of his generation. The Swiss phenom had never known defeat until he arrived in Squamish and faced the then-unclimbed Cobra Crack (5.14b). In the midst of failure, he learns his romantic partner is pregnant. A "mystical experience" entices him to abandon her and the child to join a Catholic monastery, where he cuts off contact with the outside world for thirteen years. Somehow, he finds his way back to confront the snake that has plagued him for two decades.

84 From Kentucky to Canyonlands

Mary Catherine Eden writes about growing up "land rich and money poor" with her parents and older sister in rural Kentucky. While helping to raise her sister's three children through a string of devastating family setbacks, Eden discovers rock climbing one summer in Moab, Utah, after graduating high school. She soon finds herself on top of Castleton Tower realizing she doesn't know how to rappel. She improvises, correctly, and continues on a gritty path that leads to her becoming one of the best crack climbers on the planet.

[Cover] **Mary Catherine Eden squeezes up Gabriel (5.13c), an offwidth route in Zion National Park.** Keisuke Mizuno | [This Page] **Michael Gardner rides his Harley-Davidson motorcycle under the watchful eye of the Tetons. Gardner was known as someone whose personality couldn't be put in a box. He had many different interests outside of climbing and skiing—skateboarding, skijoring, spirituality, Harleys—each of which he held dear.** Drew Smith

DEPARTMENTS

12 Sharp End
Derek Franz writes about Séb Berthe's free ascent of the Dawn Wall.

14 Letters
Our readers write.

19 Escape Route
Katie Ives, Andrew Szalay and Abbey Collins share reading recommendations. Collins interviews some of the researchers behind the new collection *Other Everests*. And Hannah Provost cracks open a very old book.

30 On Belay
Robbie Phillips sails to the historic seacliffs of St. Kilda.

42 The Climbing Life
Chris Schulte measures a day. Abbey Collins gets engaged in the Red River Gorge. Derek Franz sends a poetry problem. And Lauren Fox sees the consequences of climate change in the Himalaya close-up.

95 Full Value
Jill Wheatley found solace in the mountains after a traumatic brain injury upended her life. A decade later, she reflects on her relationship with the high peaks.

104 Local Hero
Kapil Bisht celebrates Maya Sherpa's insistence on revolting against traditional gender roles.

106 Off Belay
Leo Gambella finds a bit of clarity during a cloudy day in Patagonia at the start of his career.

Alpinist.com

Encyclopedic climbing news from around the world:
alpinist.com/newswire

Videos, interviews, reviews, podcasts and exclusive online stories:
alpinist.com/feature

Climbers test gear hard in the field:
alpinist.com/mountain

High Camp, *Alpinist*'s premium electronic newsletter:
alpinist.com/signup

[Photo] **Katie Mussel finds a deep jam as she makes her way up Mudslide (5.10) in Indian Creek.** Austin Schmitz

Editor-in-Chief: Derek Franz (derek@alpinist.com)
Art Director: Mike Lorenz (mlorenz@alpinist.com)
Designer: Karianne Shetter (karianne@alpinist.com)
Associate Editor: Abbey Collins (abbey@alpinist.com)
Editors Emeriti: Christian Beckwith, Michael Kennedy, Katie Ives
Special Correspondents: Bob A. Schelfhout Aubertijn, Steve Grossman, Janice Sacherer
Fact-checking: Diana Boyer, Eliza Nelson, Ethan Daly
Copy Editor: Laura Case Larson

Regional Correspondents: Chris McNamara, Yosemite; Renny Jackson, Tetons; Don Serl, Coast Range; Raphael Slawinski, Canadian Rockies; Rolando Garibotti, Argentine Patagonia; Damien Gildea, Antarctica; Ian Parnell, United Kingdom; Rémi Thivel, Pyrenees; Claude Gardien, France; Menno Boermans, Switzerland; Vlado Linek, Slovakia; Eberhard Jurgalski, Himalaya; Anna Piunova, CIS; Tamotsu Nakamura, Japan.

With additional thanks to: The American Alpine Club Library, Sam Hennessey, Adam Fabrikant, Renny Jackson, Colleen Gardner, Marcus Garcia, Jane Jackson, Rolando Garibotti, Katie Griffith, Alex Auritt, Jeffrey Marrazzo, Franco Zarate, Nestor Maldonado, Eberhard Jurgalski, Nat Bailey, Justin Sweeny, Dustin English, Adam Carman, Katherine Indermaur, Pete Whittaker, Will Birkett, Scott Johnston, Jonathan Westaway, Peter Hansen, Sarah Pickman, Colby Coombs, Caitlin Palmer, Elena Hight, Tila Roka, Narbu Chhiring Gurung, Shyam Krishna Panta, Umakanta Sapkota, Melinda MacKenzie, Ryan Wheatley, Dawa Wongchu Sherpa, Mingma Gyalje Sherpa, Jonathan Littman, Spencer McKay, Thomasina Pidgeon, Cyrille Berthod, Amity, Warme, Tyler Denham.

Alpinist
Height of Land Publications
P.O. Box 190, 60 Main Street, Suite 101, Jeffersonville, VT 05464
Telephone: 802-644-6606; toll-free (US only): 888-424-5857
Website: www.alpinist.com

Editor and Publisher: Adam Howard (howie@holpublications.com)
Publisher: Justin Reyher (justin@holpublications.com)
Associate Publisher: Paul Davis (paul@holpublications.com)
Business Manager: Michele Peoples (michele@holpublications.com)
Subscriptions Manager: Holly Howard (subscriptions@holpublications.com)
Accounting: Karen Huard (karen@holpublications.com)
Account Executive: Conor Sedmak (conor@holpublications.com)
Propeller Head: Duane Howard

Printed in the USA.
All rights reserved. Copyright © 2025 Height of Land Publications, Ltd. Reproduction without permission is prohibited. Photographs and artwork copyrighted by photographer.

Subscriptions: www.alpinist.com, subscriptions@alpinist.com
802-644-6606; toll-free (US only): 888-424-5857

Newsstand Sales: Howard White & Assoc. (hwhite9611@aol.com)

Newsstand Distribution: Comag Marketing Group

Shop Sales: Height of Land Publications, 888-424-5857

POSTMASTER, send address changes to:
Alpinist, P.O. Box 190 Jeffersonville, VT 05464

Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement #40612608. Canada returns to be sent to: The Mail Group PO Box 25542 London, ON N6C6B2

Alpinist Issue 89, Spring 2025

Alpinist (ISSN: 1540-725X) is published quarterly by Height of Land Publications, Ltd., P.O. Box 190, Jeffersonville, VT 05464; (802) 644-6606.
US subscription rates are: $75/4 issues, $130/8 issues.
Canadian rates: $90/4 issues, $160/8 issues.
All other countries: $100/4 issues, $180/8 issues.
Periodical postage paid at Jeffersonville, VT, and at an additional mailing office.

Totally Stoked Members: Ben Arians, Matteo Campbell, Robert Kelly, Darrin MacLeod, Kei Tsuda

We support the following organizations:

CONTRIBUTORS

BRENDAN JONES is a freelance writer and novelist living in Sitka, Alaska, with his wife, three girls, six chickens and Aussie shepherd. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Smithsonian*, Patagonia, *GQ* and elsewhere. Jones won the 2022 Green Earth Book Award for his novel *Whispering Alaska*.

HANNAH PROVOST is a freelance writer based in Golden, Colorado. Depending on the season, you'll find her either making snappy moves on boulders, punting on sport routes or scaring herself while alpine climbing. She hosts the *American Alpine Club Podcast* and is the editor-in-chief of the AAC's quarterly *Guidebook*.

Originally from northern Ontario, **JILL WHEATLEY** has adventured in over sixty countries. In the aftermath of a traumatic brain injury, Wheatley went on a journey from the brink of death to some of the world's most pristine peaks. Wheatley lived in Kathmandu for several years and now resides in Canmore, Alberta.

KAPIL BISHT is a writer based in Kathmandu, Nepal. He suffers from a strange form of acrophobia: his legs quiver when he's on the rooftop of a city building, but they egg him on when he's crossing a mountain pass. He's constantly looking for excuses and funds to visit more villages and wild places.

ROBBIE PHILLIPS is a climbing obsessive and a fully committed "lifer." He's spent decades dangling from big walls, boulders and sport routes across the globe, but Scotland's windswept rock keeps calling him home. When he's not climbing, he's telling tales about it—through film, writing or just talking to anyone who'll listen.

CHRIS SCHULTE has been climbing for more than thirty years. He's opened routes and problems from Colorado's San Juans to Switzerland. He splits his heart between Indian Creek and Fontainebleau, his home between the Dragoons and the Sierra Nevada, and his head between ambassadorships and supporting the Access Fund.

Photographers, from top to bottom: Julie Stauffer, Allyssa Burnley, Jill Wheatley, Rupa Lama, Ryan Balharry, Stefan Kürzi

Scan to Subscribe.

As a reader-supported magazine, we need your help to continue capturing the art of ascent in its most vivid manifestations.

Join us.

Alpinist

Preparation makes it possible. Not easy.
Photo credit: Daniel Hug
AG1®
The Daily Health Drink
AG
NSF
CERTIFIED SPORT

For alpinist Jost Kobusch, reaching the 24,727th foot of Everest solo in winter without oxygen wasn't the hardest decision—turning back was. Knowing when to push and when to pause takes guts, focus, and relentless preparation. With 75 ingredients in every scoop, AG1 helps Jost stay ready for every step of the climb.

drinkAG1.com

The statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.

THE SHARP END

Impossible Things | *Derek Franz*

ALICE LAUGHED. *"... One* can't *believe impossible things."*

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. There goes the shawl again!"
—Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass

Dawn Wall free in a day. There, I thought it, said it, wrote it. Someday it's sure to happen, yes?

Séb Berthe agrees. On January 31 the thirty-one-year-old became the fourth person to free climb the thirty-two-pitch 5.14d route on El Capitan after a fourteen-day push.

"I have actually been thinking a lot about that!" he responded when I presented him with that ridiculous statement. "I believe that would certainly be the hardest and ... the coolest El Cap ascent ever done. I think it is possible, not for me, though. [It would have to be] for someone really committed to this project for several seasons."

Committed is the key word. But to what? That is the question to be answered. Is it lunacy, or the mark of a visionary, to believe commitment to such a thing is worthwhile?

There's a reason the quote from Carroll's 1871 novel endures, repeated for generations. Saying, speaking, believing—these all make a thing that much closer to reality. Or, potentially, they only lead one deeper into rabbit holes of delusion. Fanciful, futuristic things are generally assumed to be delusion until they are made real by alchemists—people who maybe have to be at least a little bit mad to believe such possibilities in the first place.

Climbers constantly test themselves against delusion.

Lynn Hill became the first person to free climb El Capitan (Tu-Tok-A-Nu-La) via the Nose (5.14a, 2,900') in 1993. It made people's heads spin to think that a five-foot-two woman would succeed where so many bigger—presumably "stronger"—men had failed for so many years. It had also taken Hill years of effort, starting around 1989. Not satisfied, she returned in 1994 and free climbed the route in twenty-three hours.

Hill's feats would not be repeated for more than a decade. In 2005, Beth Rodden and Tommy Caldwell freed the Nose as a team over four days. Caldwell sent the route twice more that year, first in twelve hours, then in eleven, becoming the second person to free climb Tu-Tok-A-Nu-La in a day. Another decade went by before the Nose saw another free ascent, by Jorg Verhoeven. And it wasn't until 2019 that Babsi Zangerl became the third woman to send the route when she climbed it with her partner Jacopo Larcher.

It was also in 2019 that Berthe emerged onto the El Cap stage, when he became the first person to send the Nose ground up without pre-inspection (rehearsing the crux moves that are encountered high on the wall). Zangerl even supported his bid by supplying extra food when he was on the verge of giving up.

It's worth mentioning that just months ago, from November 19 to 22, while Issue 88 was being sent to press, Zangerl became the first person to *flash* the Big Stone when she completed every pitch of Freerider (5.13a, ca. 3,300') on her first try. It is, of course, the same route that Alex Honnold free soloed in 2017—which remains one of the most phenomenal events in climbing history—but that was accomplished after extensive rehearsal, unlike Zangerl's ascent.

There are so many examples of humans surpassing "impossible" barriers on El Cap alone, I can't possibly fit them all here.

Getting back to the Dawn Wall: as a free climb it sounded wacky when Caldwell started exploring its feasibility in 2007. The route he envisioned tackled the tallest, steepest and sheerest panel of granite on the monolith. Even after he ascertained that the individual moves were possible, the prospect of having enough endurance—and skin on his fingertips—to redpoint seven pitches of 5.14, eleven pitches of 5.13, nine pitches of 5.12 and five pitches of 5.11, in sequence from bottom to top without returning to the ground, was far from guaranteed. That's not even taking into account the variable weather conditions that had to be endured; the challenge of living on the wall for so long; or that several crux sections rely on Birdbeaks placed into thin seams for protection against large falls. All of this adds up to what is probably the most sustained big-wall free climb on the planet.

In 2014, after years of effort and attempts with various partners, Caldwell left the ground with Kevin Jorgeson on December 27. They remained on the wall for nineteen straight days with help from a support team that kept them supplied. On January 14, 2015, the world watched them top out the climb on live television, and President Barack Obama called to congratulate them.

Less than two years later, Adam Ondra became the third person to free the Dawn Wall during his first trip to Yosemite. He completed the climb in an eight-day push with a smaller team supporting him.

Berthe's journey to send the Dawn Wall began in 2022, when he sailed from Belgium to Mexico and then traveled by land to Yosemite to avoid the carbon footprint of flying. Maintaining an elite level of fitness while confined to a sailboat, and dealing with seasickness for weeks on end, added a huge challenge. He spent twenty-three days on the wall with Siebe Vanhee and made steady progress to the fourteenth pitch, a 5.14d traverse. He felt he was close to sending it, but kept slipping at the end. He ran out of supplies and the desire to continue in such a protracted style.

Last September, he once again sailed from Europe with friends. They used homemade hangboards to train during the fifty-day voyage to the Panama Canal. On land, they spent three weeks on a bus. They arrived in Yosemite in late November, where Berthe rendezvoused with Connor Herson.

Herson was on a break from college and had gotten a head start rigging fixed lines to enable more efficient practice of the moves. Once Berthe arrived, the bulk of the remaining rigging work was split between the two, Herson told me.

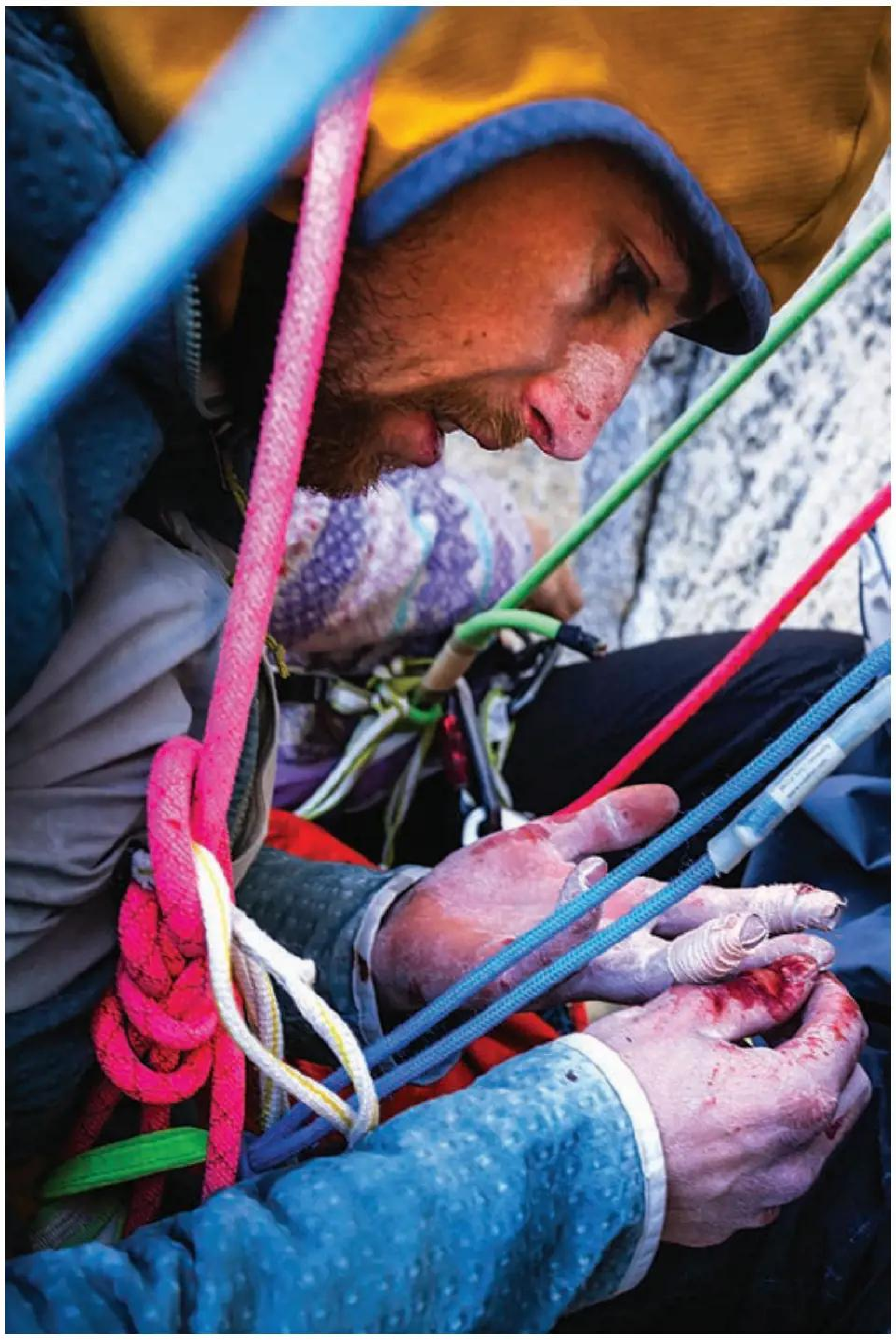
"It was really impressive to watch Séb climb. He moves so well on granite and was making 5.14 look easy, even on his first day in the Valley!" said Herson, who free climbed the Nose at age fifteen in 2018. He's been steadily working through the other El Cap free routes since then.

For most of December, Berthe and Herson worked the route in a cycle of two days on, one day off. In a press release, Berthe wrote:

> *The Dawn Wall hadn't changed—it was still an enormous undertaking, and everything about this process was hard: the climbing, the freezing winter temperatures mixed with the heat and sun exposure of this south-facing wall, the constant exposure, the unstable protection, the falling ice ...*

By late December they were exhausted. Herson had to return to his engineering studies. Berthe's fitness level had dropped, so he went bouldering in Bishop, California, for a week, then rested for two weeks. He still didn't feel ready when a window of dry weather entered the forecast and Berthe's partner, Soline Kentzel, offered to belay him on a redpoint bid.

"To be honest, at that point, I didn't feel entirely ready for a push attempt," Berthe wrote. "Although I had successfully done almost all the hard sections, I felt I still had work to do—especially on the post-crux pitches."



[Photo] **Séb Berthe assesses his skin on January 29, Day 13 of a successful fourteen-day push to free climb El Capitan's Dawn Wall (VI 5.14d). With a storm bearing down, he would press on through the night of January 30, climbing two pitches of 5.13, five of 5.12 and five of 5.11 to top out at 8 a.m. on January 31.** Chris Natalie

By himself on January 12, Berthe hauls enough food and water for two people to spend two weeks on the wall. In the process of hoisting so much baggage to the portaledge camp below Pitch 14, he injures his back. "I had intense lumbar pain with every movement," he writes. "It took me four full rest days before I could even think about climbing again."

He starts his push at 5 a.m. on January 17. The first two days see steady, but not easy, progress. On the first day, on Pitch 7, the first 5.14, he climbs through the cruxes but forgets to clip several pieces of protection: "Now, I'm well above my last piece, a rusty Birdbeak, and I feel exhausted. Falling here is not an option.... I'm completely at my limit. The risk is too high—especially with my back injury starting to hurt again—so, reluctantly, I grab the quickdraw."

The moment sets the tone for what is to come.

He reaches Pitch 14 on the sixth day of his push. It nearly shuts him down again like in 2022. On Day 7 his back injury hurts too much to climb.

On Day 8, he manages the pain with ibuprofen and resumes climbing, but it's getting cold: "My toes are freezing in my tight shoes.... Thankfully, Soline, the ultimate belayer, warms them up against her body between tries." He squeaks through the crux on his tenth try amid falling snow.

On Day 10, he sends the next crux pitch (5.14c/d) on his third try. But he now faces a stack of difficult pitches he didn't have time to rehearse before leaving the ground. Pitch 16, the Loop Pitch (5.14a), gives him more problems, and his skin starts falling apart.

After a rest day, a big storm is moving in. He has three days to finish the wall. "I decide to bend my ethics a little," he wrote of splitting the down-and-up section into two "5.13d" pitches, using a ledge in between.

He takes a gear-ripping fall on the next pitch. He's nauseous with a headache. The forecast worsens. "Finishing before the rain seems nearly impossible," he writes.

On Day 13, Erik Sloan gives Kentzel a break from belaying. Things go better, but six of Berthe's fingers are bleeding.

To make it off the wall before the storm comes, however, he must climb through the night on Day 14. With Kentzel back at the belay, Berthe scrapes through, exhausted, taking multiple falls, even slipping on a 5.11 offwidth pitch. He sends the last two pitches (5.13a and 5.12a) as dawn breaks and stands on the summit at 8 a.m. on January 31.

Before heading down the East Ledges descent, the team poses with a banner: "El Cap Climbers Against Fascism."

"Sure, this is 'just' a ... sporting achievement," Berthe writes. "[But] silence is complicity; resistance is a duty. What is happening right now in Belgium, France, Europe in general, and the United States is deeply concerning."

Climbing is just climbing, but it teaches us to overcome barriers and believe in impossible things. Even world freedom, justice, peace and prosperity.

The question is, *what* are we committed to? ■

LETTERS

Letter to My Friend, John Middendorf

DEUCEY,

There once was a dreadfully tangled knot of rope; a knot of dreams; a knot of impossibilities: all the things that could be, if only they could be untangled.

On mile-high splinters of granite—we all dreamt of them, brother. We happy few, traveling the world in search of our cathedrals—we would worship them through spyglasses, craning our necks, prostrating ourselves toward them; *praying* on those hand cracks like peregrines, while we in turn were preyed upon by gargoyles of ice that threatened to fall at any moment. Cloistered in our hanging tents, we moved slowly, though ever upward, in our quest for meaning.

I keep imagining you, miles out on Great Trango in '92. I like to picture you from above—all the best climbing photographs are from above—your gnarled hand stretched out toward me, fiddling a Birdbeak into a hairline crack on a vast shield of golden granite. Shades on. Cool as hell. Xaver "Toto" Bongard is lounging on a portaledge, belaying you attentively … I can make out two specks, tents, on the Dunge Glacier way down below.

I cannot write a mere obituary to you, great man; what would amount to a list of achievements, dates and records would seem demeaning. Where would be the point of reflected light in your eye as you looked up at me over your reading glasses? Where would be the wince-inducing click of your hip joint as you stepped up onto that foothold? And where would be the evident and absolute joy of you mastering a new skill: piloting a paraglider, bending a corner of a portaledge frame or, perhaps, performing some new feat of acrobatics on the trapeze?

Little snapshots linger in my mind. That high-pitched giggle as we careened down the Thunder Rush rapids on Tasmania's Franklin River … Excited you were, like a child opening the doors into a theme park, as you showed me and Steve Quinlan around your A5 workshop in Flagstaff, Arizona … Your faux shock as I pretended to taste a mysterious blue powder placed in neat little piles in Tasmania's Weld Valley forest (we later learnt this was 1080 poison used back then by Forestry for exterminating native animals they saw as pests).

All those thoughts and ideas, all those conversations, lost now to my sluggish mind. Now that you're gone the words are left hanging in space, all jumbled, suspended on the threads of some kinetic mobile sculpture. As they spin I catch your ideas only partially, my responses oblique.

All those theories and secrets I still need you to let me in on. I want you to explain Fermat's last theorem to me, one last time. I want you to persevere with me, to describe the nature of an incompressible Newtonian fluid. To clarify just how you managed to perfect that curve on a rectilinear grid during your GIS days. And no, I have not yet managed to solve that wire puzzle that you gave me nine years ago.

I wish you were still here, yet I know life is finite and everyone has to exit sooner or later. I am fully aware of this grasping at nature—the paradox that all the time in the world will never seem enough. And I know that you are among the particles of the universe now, unconfined and capable of being in all places, on the verge of things … But I cannot help wanting you to fix me one more inexcusably bad instant coffee.

And John, we all know that a human is not simply a tally of their deeds. Yet those deeds surely do make the human. And with you, those deeds did indeed add to that tally.

I now realize the expansive, groundbreaking and sometimes perilous expeditions that you undertook in the mountains allowed you to be dedicated to humanly endeavors and others here on level ground. Immersing yourself in that great cathedral of nature, again and again, whether it be on El Capitan, the Great White Throne in Zion or in the Karakoram mountains—these moments of great insight produced in you a calm and serene toughness. I thought you incapable of panic.

You instinctively knew that nothing could really faze you, and if you chipped away at it, you would reach the summit, in whatever field you chose, whether it be the Harvard and Stanford degrees, creating the first sliding nut or surviving that desolate storm on Half Dome in 1986.

You had no doubt in your mind that if you worked at something, and worked at it persistently, you could do it. And I wondered, *Was this humble resolve no other than a simple keepsake, collected from the mountains?* There are many such objects in your shop. Amid the Peckers and Crack-N-Ups there is the quarter-inch split-shaft bolt with the "LONGware" stamp, off of one of Harding's Nose attempts … as well as that 1937 piton from Ormes' Rib on the North Tower of Ship Rock … the crystal tourmaline from the Baltoro … and the curious homemade ten-inch camming device with "Bart B." stamped on it.

A memory is a keepsake also. I recall the look on your face when "Sparky," a fellow raft guide, cut the rope in the Cauldron as the raft was sinking fast. The expression of fatherly pride when your boy nailed his first *cochon pendu* on the flying trapeze. The restrained whoop of joy as you reached the summit of the Old Man of Hoy (you didn't want to disturb the puffins).

When you took on a project, you were fully engaged and living in the moment. Whether that moment was designing a radically new portaledge shape, teaching a student how to hem a rain fly or diving into the history of some arcane piece of climbing equipment. Or simply taking your children Remi and Rowen for a walk. It didn't matter. You were fully there.

Of course, on Great Trango you had to dwell in the present moment for the duration of the climb. The Grand Voyage *was* one of the greatest climbs in the history of Himalayan exploration. You found yourself probing the limits of what was possible when working with whatever you had been given and what you and a partner were able to carry along the journey. Knowing your strengths and honing them was one of your greatest skills. Many of us spread ourselves too thinly; I know I do. We take on project after project like jacks-of-all-trades, in a masters-of-none kind of way. But that wasn't you.

You had little aptitude for reflection, preferring to look to the future, always to the future. You flashed your Robert De Niro smile (I will always picture you dancing to Louis Prima's song "I Ain't Got Nobody") as you whipped out your little puce pad and pencil stub. You'd begin scribbling diagrams, mathematical equations, doodles … Forever a curious mind. I always had to maintain restraint from peeking over your shoulder into that "book of odd thoughts and calculations," though I doubt you would have minded.

You gave a boat to the Bob Brown Foundation once and loaned a friend the deposit for a house. Perhaps that's your most important gift to me, that kindness begets kindness, and how this in turn bankrolls a life of contentment. Everybody, it seems, has stories of your generosity; stories of you giving your time, crafting equipment in your workshop to hand to others or offering substantial sums of money to friends. You loaned me the money to buy a car recently and when I went to pay you back you said, "Nah, keep it."

Deucey, putting your revolutionary D4 portaledge designs online, making them open-source, was a gift to the world climbing community and remains one of your greatest acts of generosity. This symbolic gesture quietly taught a certain multinational a lesson in good grace.

I keep thinking about the phases of life. I bet you were a goofy kid with your Legg–Calvé–Perthes disease, asthma and calipers: I picture the character of Forrest Gump when I think of you winning the school cross-country running race in spite of those early challenges. This, here, speaks more than any other event in your life as testament to your dedication.

Deucey, I need not recount your strong, youthful climbing days. We were all of us children of summer. We need not interrogate such things as being on a hanging belay and putting your cheek to the warm stone … Or up high, without a rope, on sloping granite edges as fingers bead with sweat … Or sitting on the floor in some sunbaked car park, sorting your rack in interlacing fans, like a work of art.

And then the middle decades of your charmed life—when you did your finest work, my friend … The inevitable meeting of your life partner, Jeni, on the Colorado River, and the two of you bringing Rowen and Remi into the world—two passionate and remarkable humans.

You seemed to have boundless time and energy for passing on your knowledge and ethical code to your children. You didn't just share your knowledge, you lived it, instructing with patience and kindness. In your life you possessed an extraordinary gift for making the complex simple. You ensured that the wisdom you imparted would resonate far beyond their childhood (I constantly strive to emulate your presence to your family).

There was a wonderful naivete about you; you didn't need to prove anything to anybody. And by neglecting such trivialities you freed yourself of fear, at least the fear of others' opinions. And yet, your heart lay wide open and vulnerable. You placed an almost sacred weight on loyalty. This led to sometimes vocal disappointment when people you classed as comrades let you down. Though your friends knew that your friendship and constancy reflected your love for them.

[Photo] **Friends Paul Pritchard, left, and John Middendorf.** Simon Mentz

And you turned this love into action. This was exemplified by your quiet yet loud, and ultimately successful, effort to save Yosemite's Camp 4. When the famous campground was at risk of being turned into a parking lot, you galvanized a group of legendary climbers—Jim Bridwell, Tom Frost, Lynn Hill and the like—into action and succeeded in saving a piece of climbing history from destruction.

Another example of this "love into action" approach of yours was upon your arrival in Tasmania. You found something spiritual in the forest, and figured out a way of healing the devastation you saw there: a company, propped up by the state of Tasmania, was tearing the still-beating heart out of this magical island. You set to work with soft resolve making portaledges for the forest activists. Now there is a sewing table at the Bob Brown Foundation HQ named "Deucey's Table of Dreams."

We talked long about the technical problems of getting me, with my paralysis, up to one of your portaledges for an action. We were going to do our part in saving the old-growth eucalyptus by getting arrested together. You perfected a one-handed ropewalking technique for me, which I found I could actually do!

But, I delayed. Perhaps through fear, perhaps through apathy, and this to my regret, because now you're no longer here.

Your commitment to a course was sometimes overwhelming to the onlooker. You would disappear for months at a time into your shop and come out with wondrous formulas cast from your imagination; be it a completed book or a new gadget or tent design.

You recognized time passing like breath on a dandelion clock and you realized that connection with friends and family was what really mattered. Toward the end, you ramped up the pace of your creativity. And to those on the outside, it seemed you were in a frenzy—finishing off all that might be left hanging.

Many may not see the true urgency of life, but I think you did.

We can hold the memories dear and grieve for your passing; let the tears fall if we wish. But the truth is that the transitory nature of life, of *all* matter, makes the universe that which it is. In the soft, bright centers of our hearts, we all know that this world of ours is ephemeral, and at some point we will pass on. Without this physical law there would be no spring shoots or newborn babies, or nascent planets in faraway galaxies.

I suppose each one of us has something intangible born from the mountain, and if we survive for a period, the mountain has something more for us—it reminds us how to return home.

Yet, how I wish you were here, around this campfire, John Middendorf, to nod in sage agreement over a glass of single malt.

Here's to a great, big, huge, unassuming life.

—Paul Pritchard, Taroona, Tasmania

[To read more about Middendorf's life, see the Sharp End story "Fabulous Roman Candles" in Issue 87 (Autumn 2024), which is also available online.—Ed.]

LETTERS

ON BELAY

Twenty Classic Climbs in Twenty Days | *Aidan Multhauf*

David Katzenmeyer and I became friends in 2019 while working as climbing guides in Moab. Each season we'd try to make plans together. Winter? *Let's go to Asia or Mexico.* Spring and autumn? *Indian Creek or Yosemite.* We are by no means elite athletes—CBD companies wouldn't put our names on their ambassador list if we paid them. Nonetheless, over the years, we've spent seasons climbing together across the American West and abroad. We're dialed, but not pushing the limits of human ability.

Slow Down, Take in the Experience

ALPINIST 87 ONCE AGAIN informed, entertained and enlightened, and for this reader it caused some angst. I guess that is what a good publication should do.

Aidan Multhauf's chronicle of climbing twenty of the Fifty Classic Climbs of North America—from Steve Roper and Allen Steck's 1979 compendium—in twenty days set me on edge. Don't get me wrong, I compliment Multhauf and his climbing partner on a feat of perseverance and endurance.

But what would legendary climbers and authors like Roper and Steck think of such a stunt, or has the sport of mountaineering evolved into yet another phase that promotes speed over the aesthetics of climbing? And what would Lito Tejada-Flores—the author of the seminal 1967 essay "Games Climbers Play," as well as "Alpinism as Humanism: Second Thoughts on Climbing Games" (1990)—think of the future of such climbing capers in the present age?

I can't speak for Roper, Steck or Tejada-Flores, but I can offer my own perspective after a lifetime of outdoor adventures. To me, treating the mountains as objectives rather than objects of wonder cheapens the experience. Racing at breakneck speed from one mountain range to another is reminiscent of tourists visiting the great capitals of Europe in a whirlwind ten days—the "if it's Tuesday, this must be Belgium" syndrome. This pernicious malady extends far beyond the Twenty Classic Climbs precedent. Its roots go back at least to the Seven Summits expeditions, followed by the intense competition to initially climb all of the world's 8000-meter peaks. Now that same rivalry extends to completing that goal without supplemental oxygen and in record speed, objective dangers be damned.

I have climbed a half dozen of the Fifty Classic Climbs. I remember them all so well, but the ones that really stand out in my memory are the Grand Teton's Exum Ridge and Traveler Buttress at Lovers Leap.

The photo in the *Alpinist* article of the Exum Ridge reminded me of the sublime beauty of that route. Situated on the south side of the Grand, it catches the first rays of the morning sun and bathes that splendid Teton granite with a golden hue. While Multhauf and his partner leapfrogged other climbers in their race to the summit, I wonder if they were even aware of that exquisite setting. When I last climbed the Exum Ridge, my partner and I sat for some time at the top of the famous Friction Pitch in glorious sunshine and marveled at our good fortune to be in such a magnificent place.

Traveler Buttress was the most technically demanding rock climb I ever did. After leading a pitch on that route that used up every ounce of my strength and mental energy, I finally reached a belay ledge and experienced the most profound sensation I have ever had in the mountains. As I looked out over the verdant colors of the valley below, everything seemed to just stop in time. I don't recall how long this vision lasted but I was finally awakened from my reverie by shouts from my climbing partner, who was hunkered below, wondering what the hell was going on above.

I would like to think that Multhauf and his climbing partner did experience such sublime and transcendent moments during their mountaineering marathon, but I suspect that they were fleeting at best. I compliment them on their achievement, but I temper that with the notion that speed and audacious ambition are not necessarily compatible with the overall mountain experience.

In the introduction to *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*, Roper and Steck chose this quote from Gaston Rébuffat's book *Starlight and Storm*:

> *We should refuse none of the thousand and one joys that the mountains offer us at every turn. We should brush nothing aside, set no restrictions. We should experience hunger and thirst, be able to go fast, but also know how to go slowly and to contemplate.*

—Ted Gathe, Vancouver, Washington

Editor's response: While *Alpinist* strives to emphasize the experiential qualities of climbing that go beyond the numbers of grades and ticklists, we also must acknowledge that speed and distance remain integral components to "the games" we play. Furthermore, the oft-repeated sentiment that has been passed down through generations emphasizes the additive nature of climbing challenges: today's testpieces will be tomorrow's trade routes. But as Tejada-Flores points out in his 1990 essay, "There is the meaning we draw directly from challenge, movement, and skill, but also a meaning that depends on how (or whether) the climber's actions will affect others.… In addition to being a fascinating complex of games, alpinism is also a form of humanism." Indeed, this is the grey area where we as climbers continue to perform, hopefully weighing the myriad pros and cons of the ways we approach the mountains. This discussion is never-ending, hence the endless fascination.

For their part, Aidan Multhauf and David Katzenmeyer respond:

> *Like many, we were drawn to climbing because of the romanticism of the mountain's majesty, the battle against our personal limitations and the experience. On this particular objective, the experience was a package. To say any specific way of climbing is more or less valid than another is to look at the sport through a very narrow lens.*

BORN FROM

THE CLIMBING LIFE

"The classic climbing road trip. What even is that? I don't have an answer nor a prescription. I do know, however, that I won't ever stop doing it, so maybe I'll revisit the question in a decade.

"Right now, I know that these are the stories that endure; these are the photos that will be on mantels, on display at our weddings, and ultimately, our memorial services. And the people? They'll be the ones there."

–Nat Bailey, writer, climbing lifer.
Victoria Kohner-Flanagan & Drew Smith

Black Diamond

Adventure is all around you.
Take your Hilleberg tent.
Yoshiko Miyazaki

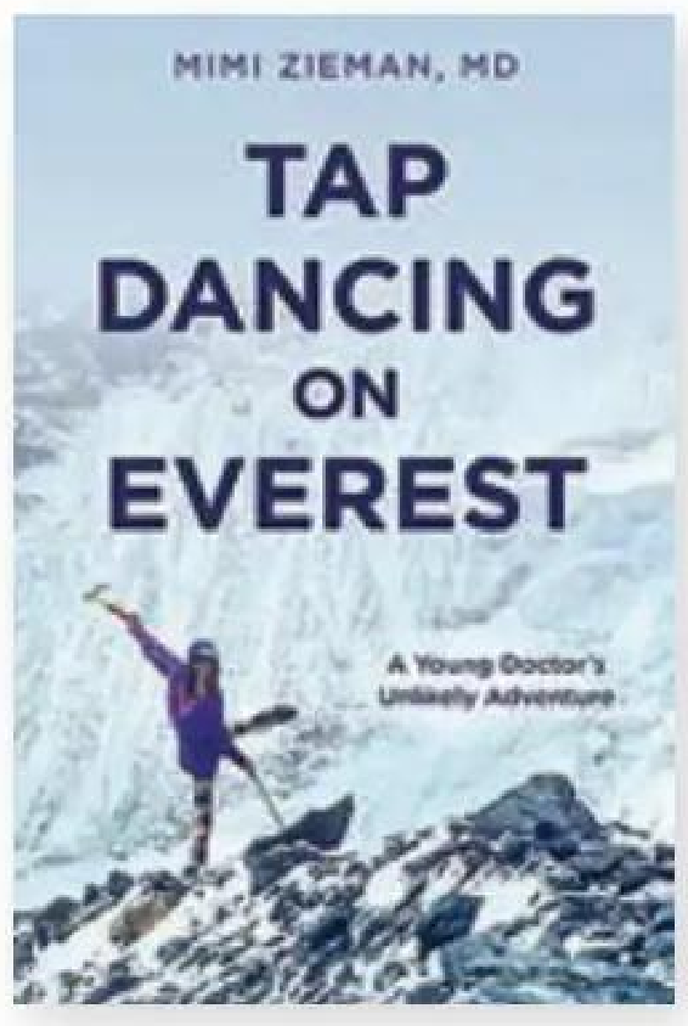
FOR OVER 50 YEARS, Hilleberg has been making the highest quality tents and shelters available. Developed in Sweden, manufactured in Europe, and used worldwide, Hilleberg tents and shelters offer the ideal balance of high strength, low weight, ease of use, and comfort.

HILLEBERG
THE TENTMAKER

ORDER A FREE CATALOG:
HILLEBERG.COM **1-866-848-8368**
Facebook.com/HillebergTheTentmaker

Escape Route

Off the Shelf



Tap Dancing on Everest: A Young Doctor's Unlikely Adventure

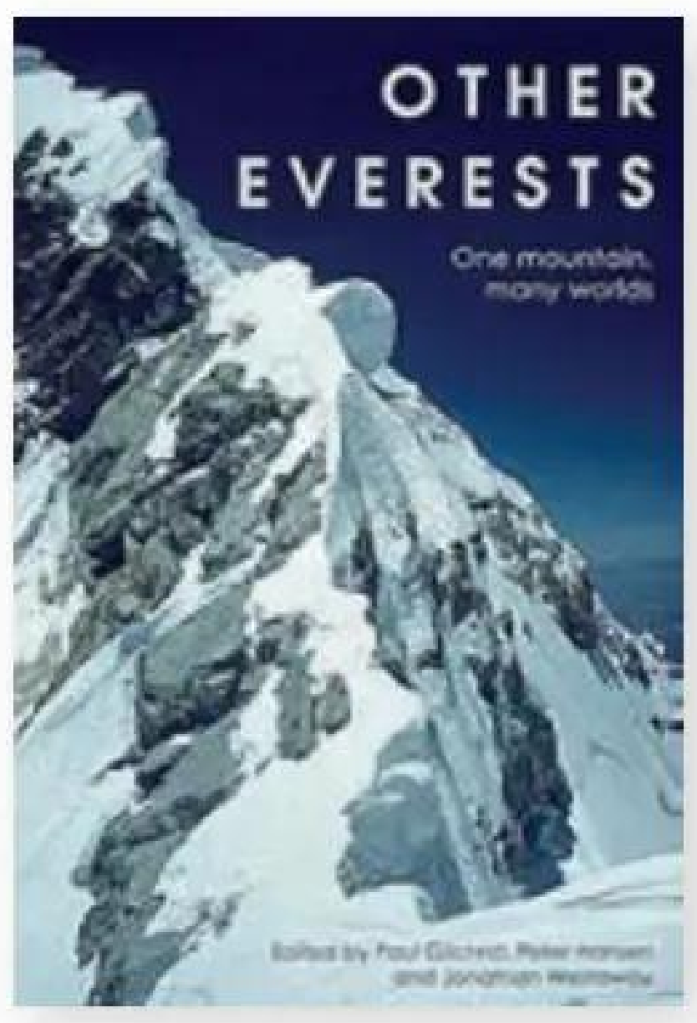
Mimi Zieman

May 1988: For days, Mimi Zieman stared into a void of whirling snow. Somewhere behind the mists, her teammates Robert Anderson, Stephen Venables and Ed Webster were staggering down Chomolungma (Everest) after the first ascent of the remote Neverest Buttress. The whiteout concealed any signal lights, and they'd brought no radios. Waiting in Advance Base Camp, she'd prepared herself to treat any illnesses or injuries. But she had no way of knowing if they were still alive—she had only the sense of the bond that tied her to them like an invisible rope.

Here and elsewhere, Zieman's memoir, *Tap Dancing on Everest*, highlights intense moments that take place offstage in many earlier climbing books—exploring the edges of a genre, a mountain, a mind. As a Holocaust survivor's daughter, Zieman maps out the geographies of loss she traveled to reach this high, stormy place, where she is reminded, ceaselessly, of the fragility of human life. As a woman, she traces her own paths to acceptance and solidarity in a largely male mountaineering world. And as a medical officer, when the climbers finally stagger out of the clouds, she demonstrates her own heroism, tending to their severe frostbite far from any hospital.

In *Alpinist* 27, Ed Webster wrote that the "ethos" of how you approach Chomolungma "will determine, in large part, the mountain you find." Appearing less than two years after his death, *Tap Dancing on Everest* is also a poignant remembrance of shared ideals. Lyrical and compassionate, vulnerable and gritty, Zieman brings us to a realm where alpine light still illuminates hidden chasms of the spirit—and where what matters most is "the intimacy of physically caring for one another."

—*Katie Ives*



Other Everests: One Mountain, Many Worlds

Edited by Paul Gilchrist, Peter H. Hansen and Jonathan Westaway

If you have complained that books about mountaineering on Chomolungma, or Mt. Everest, have grown somewhat repetitive, well, you're not alone. Man-against-mountain narratives and historical retrospectives fill the shelves but have grown stale. *Other Everests* takes a different approach.

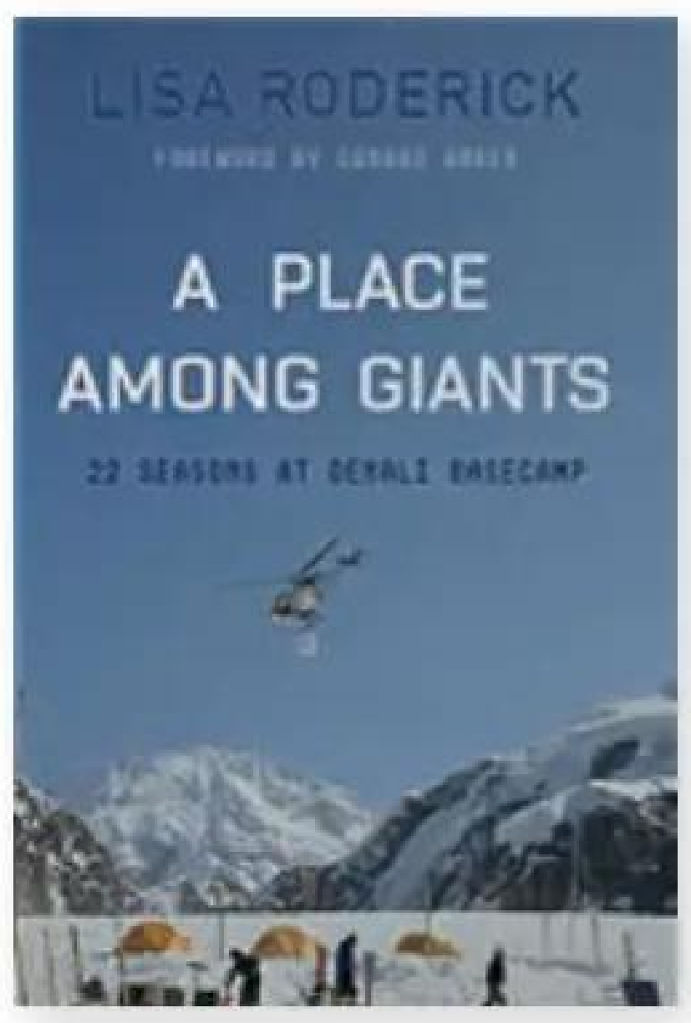
While it's become more common for Everest stories to discuss topics like ethnicity and gender, *Other Everests* goes further. It covers many issues, including climate change, industrialization, visitors to the region and nationalism.

I was particularly intrigued by how the collection covers the topic of gender, notably in Agnieszka Irena Kaczmarek's piece about how Polish climber Wanda Rutkiewicz stood out among other female climbers of the 1970s and 1980s. Kaczmarek writes that it went beyond her drive to climb; Rutkiewicz adopted a more masculine identity when she climbed in the Himalaya to match the climbing culture there.

In another chapter, Anna Saroldi reevaluates the identity and role of Sandy Irvine in the 1924 British Mt. Everest expedition. I now have a whole new perspective on Irvine: he was not passive to other characters, like George Mallory, but was an active participant in the story, equally as driven to reach the summit. Irvine's story is another that "fell through the cracks," as Saroldi notes, in the writing of Everest history, which mostly focused on individual heroes.

Overall, the editors could have moderated the academic language to meet the general mountaineering-genre audience. We are readers and embrace a wide vocabulary, but some introductions and conclusions in *Other Everests* needed to be read and reread to clearly understand the authors' fine and nuanced points.

—*Andrew Szalay*



A Place Among Giants: 22 Seasons at Denali Basecamp

Lisa Roderick

Lisa Roderick's early life growing up in Connecticut was marked by strict household rules, unthinkable tragedy and a strong desire to protect her loved ones. As she grew older, and with encouragement from her older brother, Paul, Roderick left the East Coast and moved to Colorado, where she discovered a love of mountains. Then she found the magic of Alaska.

Paul had moved to Alaska in the early 1990s. He landed a job at Talkeetna Air Taxi (TAT), flying climbers and tourists into the Alaska Range. A visit to Talkeetna in 1992 prompted Roderick to move her own life to the far north, where she eventually worked with Paul after he purchased TAT. One thing led to another, as opportunities often do in Alaska, and Roderick became the manager of Denali base camp in her early thirties.

At her post on the Kahiltna Glacier, Roderick helped pilots navigate hard-to-predict weather, assisted in rescues and interacted with some of the world's top climbers as they set off for historic ascents. She watched the glacier change with the warming climate and navigated new and less predictable crevasse danger. Through all of it, Roderick found community in the many people working together on Denali—including her own husband, climber and Denali ranger Mark Westman.

Roderick's story provides gripping insight into the operations on Denali, a new point of view on famous mountaineering feats and tragedies, and a colorful telling of a life lived outside the norm. She also offers thoughtful meditations on what it means to step away from the thing that has long defined you.

—*Abbey Collins*

Other Everests

Just over a century ago, two members of the 1924 British Mt. Everest expedition disappeared on the snow-covered slopes of Chomolungma. In the years that followed, the mystery of what happened to George Mallory and Sandy Irvine became one of the most famous stories from the world's tallest mountain. Meanwhile, so many of the other people and cultures with important connections to the mountain throughout history have been overlooked. The authors and editors of *Other Everests: One Mountain, Many Worlds* are trying to change that. Peter Hansen and Jonathan Westaway are two of the book's editors. Sarah Pickman authored one of the essays. ABBEY COLLINS

In the process of editing this, were there any ideas or themes that you were surprised by, or that you had previously not encountered in your research and work?

HANSEN: Let me start with one that I was expecting to find but was shown in new and really moving ways—the continuities in this history. People talk about the commercialization of Everest as something new that didn't happen in the past and that now we suffer from. [There's] ample evidence that it's been going on for a long time, since the beginning. The expedition with Mallory and Irvine in 1924 was sponsored by a film crew. It was mainly funded by the filmmaker.

Take other examples in more recent history. There's this mythology of the mountaineer as this individual who climbs by themselves and makes it to the top. [I was] expecting to find that. But you can see on Everest … it was clear that this notion of ascent as a battle between man and mountain meant anything that happened up until the point where you actually strapped on crampons and tied onto a rope, that didn't count as help for you. But … the network of getting gear to your camp, that's part of your support team, and likewise, all the things that happen on the mountain are also owed to or dependent on other people and these interrelationships with one another.

[There is a conventional narrative] about … giant changes—from after the nationalist period, when it's seemingly all male, then you get a big change when it becomes more diverse from the 1970s onward. The continuities across this were really quite striking.

WESTAWAY: Yeah, I was really struck by those continuities in relation to the labor hierarchies on the mountain and how imperial labor hierarchies are still present in the region today. My colleague Jo Sharma in her chapter talks about the way in which the British built hill stations in Darjeeling and Kalimpong where these expeditions set off from and they sucked in labor from all around the region, from Nepal, from Sikkim, from Tibet, from Bhutan, and racialized hierarchies of labor developed.

The great anthropologist of the Sherpas, Sherry Ortner, talks about the way in which Sherpas from the Solu-Khumbu experienced modernity through mountaineering. They encountered the world through these expeditions which drew on their labor. The British decided they were really good at carrying heavy loads at high altitudes, and they could become partners in this project. And this was part of an imperial method of co-opting different Indigenous groups to the project of empire. The British did it with the Gurkhas in the military, and they did it with the Sherpas in mountaineering as well.

One of the things I really learned through this project is the ethnic complexity of Nepal is extraordinary. And within the adventure tourism industry, something anthropologists have noted is a lot of these other ethnic groups pass as Sherpas on the mountain [to appeal to clients]. So Western clients want to experience a relationship with a Sherpa, not fully understanding that Sherpa is both a labor category and an ethnic category.

What is your hope for this project?

WESTAWAY: The Everest region [and] the Himalaya as a whole are facing enormous challenges because of climate change. We're seeing huge natural disasters because of these glacial lake outburst floods. [In] the Himalaya, glaciers are the water towers for the Indian subcontinent. If we lose the glaciers there, it's going to mean things become desperate for agricultural communities down in the plains, for instance. So that's a huge challenge everybody is facing.

I suppose when we set the project up, we really wanted to ask whether history can tell us something about the world that's created now on the mountain and whether it enables us to think about doing things differently. We particularly wanted to foreground the Indigenous presence of absolutely essential people on all these expeditions. Not just the high-altitude porters but the mail runners, the interpreters, the people who made the boots, who looked after the animals, and I suppose my vision was always that we wanted to repatriate these stories and give them back to those communities in the region so it would help them address the challenges they're facing today.

And I suppose I also had this dream that

[Photo] **Members of the 1922 British Mt. Everest expedition stop to rest on their way up the mountain. Their summit attempts were unsuccessful.** J.B. Noel, by kind permission of the Royal Geographical Society–Institute of British Geographers

if someone picked this book up in an airport on their way to Kathmandu to go climb Everest, that it would fundamentally reshape their thinking.

PICKMAN: One of my hopes for this book is that it will be part of a larger conversation about re-envisioning histories of exploration and mountaineering writ large. It used to be that all of the biographies of famous explorers, famous climbers—from Mallory and Irvine to people like Whymper and Meade, the alpine pioneers, to polar explorers, white explorers in the Amazon and East Africa—the accounts of these expeditions were either written by themselves or by people who were really just writing hagiographic biographies, and for a long time a lot of scholars ignored histories of exploration because, they said, "It's just white men blundering around, doing imperial things and that's not really interesting, that story is kind of obvious." And in the last few decades there's been a real reappraisal of what these kinds of stories, what these kinds of histories, can tell us, for example, about relationships between human beings and the ways that they see the planet, as well as commercial histories and the ways that industrialization changed the way that people approach the natural world. Also, thinking about different questions of labor and how people assert themselves in expeditionary situations—especially how people who aren't seen to have had agency, people who aren't even mentioned in expedition archives—or just kind of categorized as laborers—how might they exercise their own goals even in a very colonial or very restrictive setting?

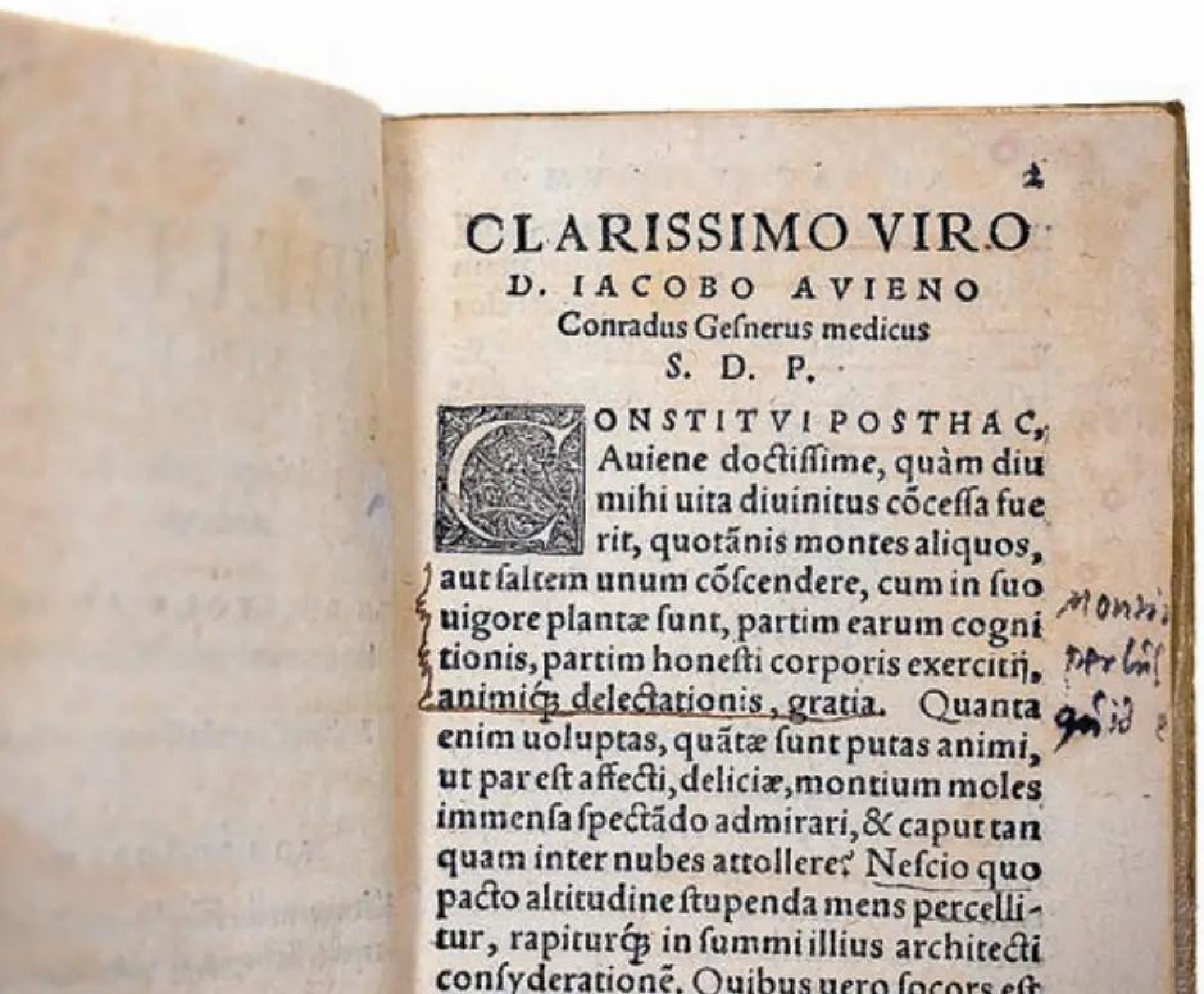
HANSEN: One of the points of the book is that there are many stories to be told, and many more remain to be told. I look forward to hearing them and hope that this book stimulates that kind of conversation. Looking beyond the obvious or the traditional, the things we take for granted, but discovering the new worlds—personally, I would say this requires some humility for most of us, and not assuming that everybody thinks about it the same way we do—and if you take that step, then some of these other worlds will be visible where you can take them seriously.

[This interview originally appeared on the Alpinist Podcast in December 2024 and has been lightly edited for length and clarity.—Ed.]

Odds & Ends

On the Admiration of Mountains.

Before technical climbers dared to swing their tools into the icy faces of mountains like Kumbhakarna (Jannu), before, even, they besieged the snowy slopes of Chomolungma (Mt. Everest), there was a time that the very idea of mountains as a place to recreate was a revolutionary thought. Conrad Gesner, a Zurich-based physician, is credited with articulating this novel idea most clearly in a 1541 letter prefacing his pamphlet on the medical benefits of milk, which he believed could only be safely consumed in mountain air. This letter, along with a 1555 essay describing his ascent of Mt. Pilatus in Switzerland, was later printed as *On the Admiration of Mountains*. One of the earliest printings, in the original Latin with a vellum binding, is shelved at the American Alpine Club Library. A forefather to the climbing goal-makers of today, Gesner had personally dedicated himself to climbing at least one mountain a year, partly to study alpine biota, and "partly for the sake of suitable bodily exercise and the delight of the spirit." He waxes eloquent on how pursuing lofty heights brings one closer to the "Supreme Architect," argues that "cold water may be drunk more safely in the mountains" and pontificates on how mountain views, odors and sounds elevate the feeling of being alive. Gesner goes so far as to say: "He is an enemy of nature, whosoever has not deemed lofty mountains to be most worthy of great contemplation." Though, as historian Dawn Hollis has shown, Gesner wasn't the first to admire mountains, he was one of the earliest Europeans to list his admiration as his raison d'être as a mountaineer. HANNAH PROVOST



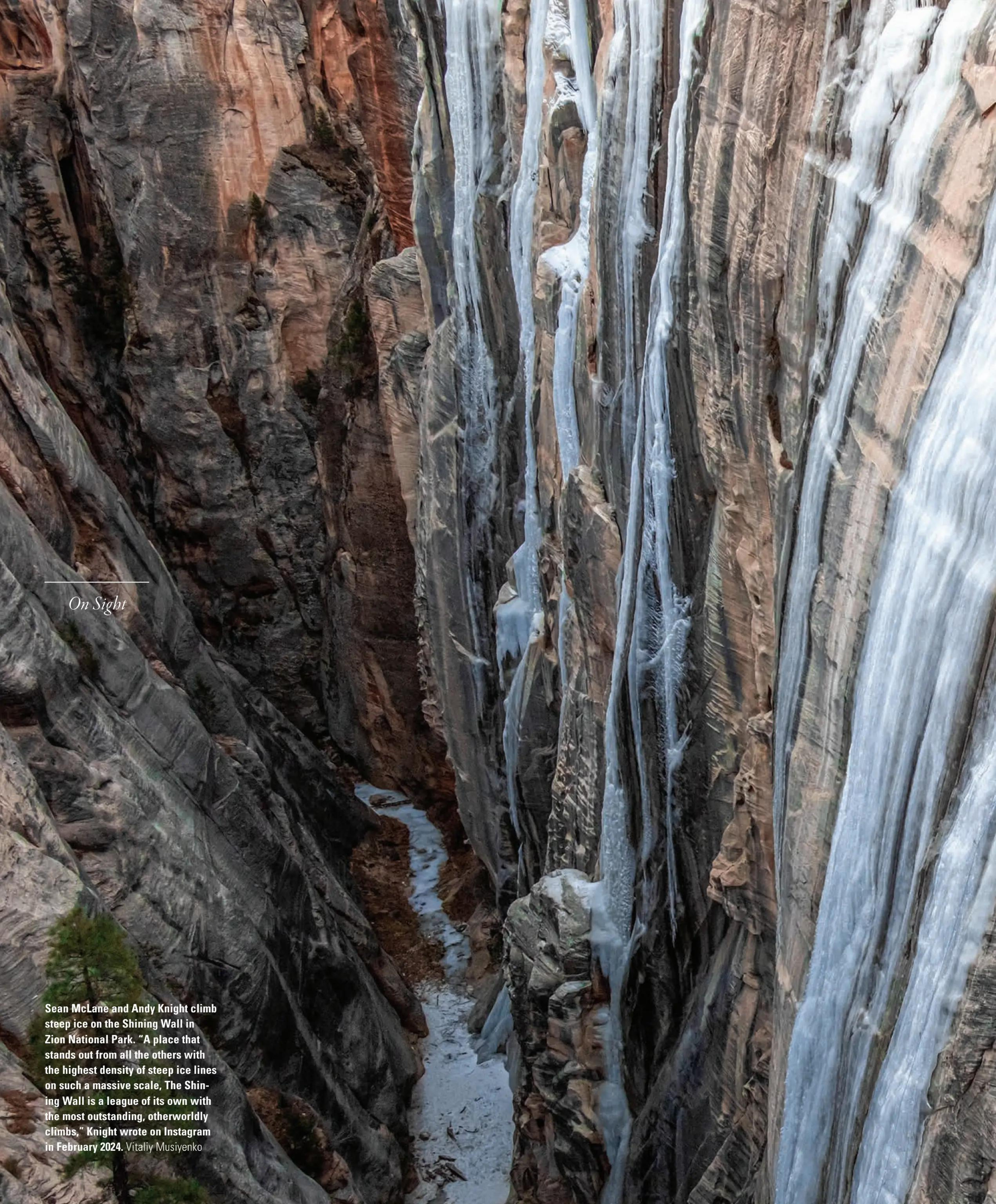
2

CLARISSIMO VIRO
D. IACOBO AVIENO
Conradus Geſnerus medicus
S. D. P.

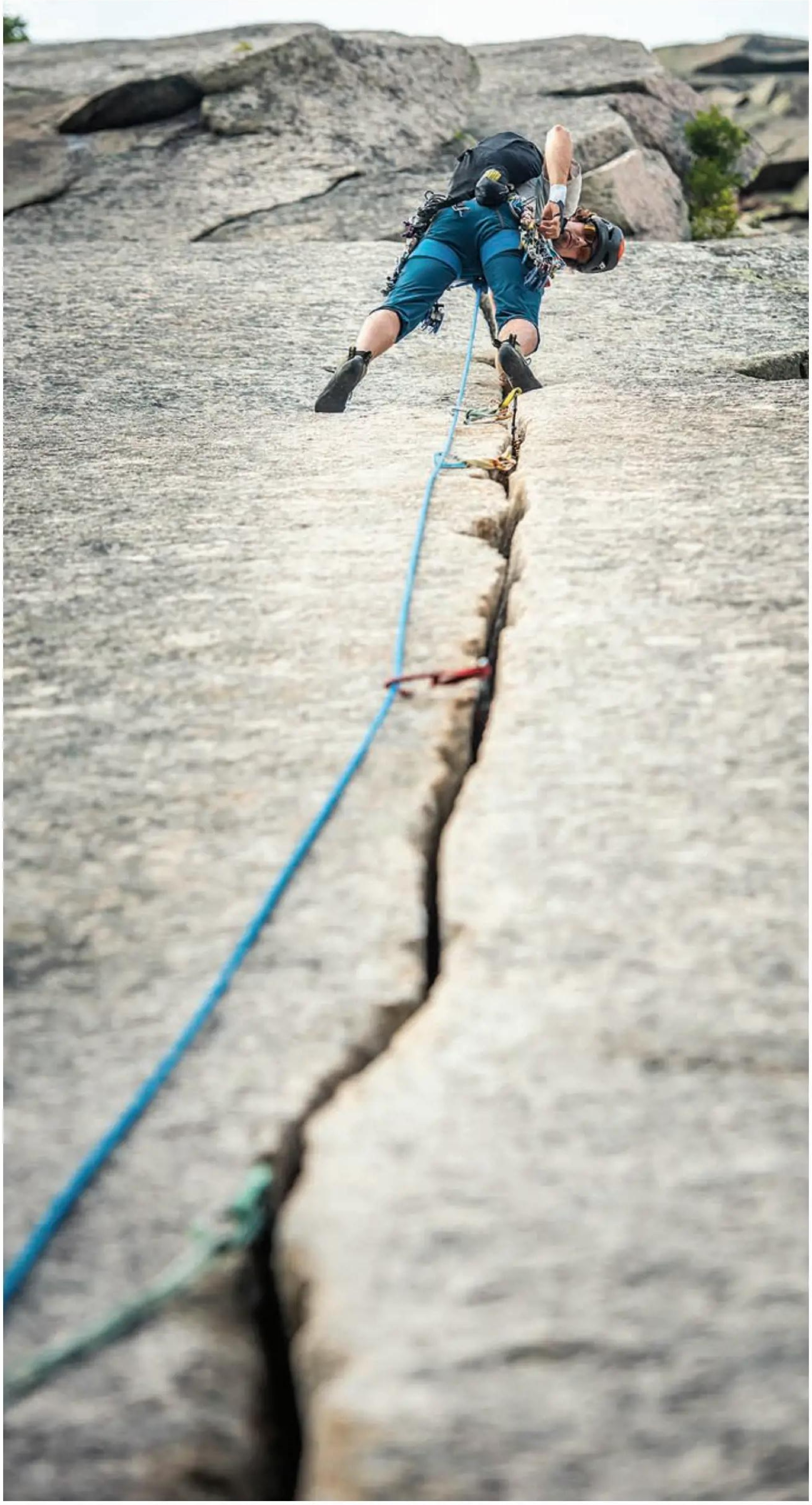
CONSTITVI POSTHAC,
Auiene doctiſſime, quàm diu
mihi uita diuinitus cõceſſa fue
rit, quotãnis montes aliquos,
aut ſaltem unum cõſcendere, cum in ſuo
uigore plantæ ſunt, partim earum cogni
tionis, partim honeſti corporis exercitij,
animiq; delectationis, gratia. Quanta
enim uoluptas, quãtæ ſunt putas animi,
ut par eſt affecti, deliciæ, montium moles
immenſa ſpectãdo admirari, & caput tan
quam inter nubes attollere? Neſcio quo
pacto altitudine ſtupenda mens percelli-
tur, rapiturq; in ſummi illius architecti
conſyderationẽ. Quibus uero ſocors eſt

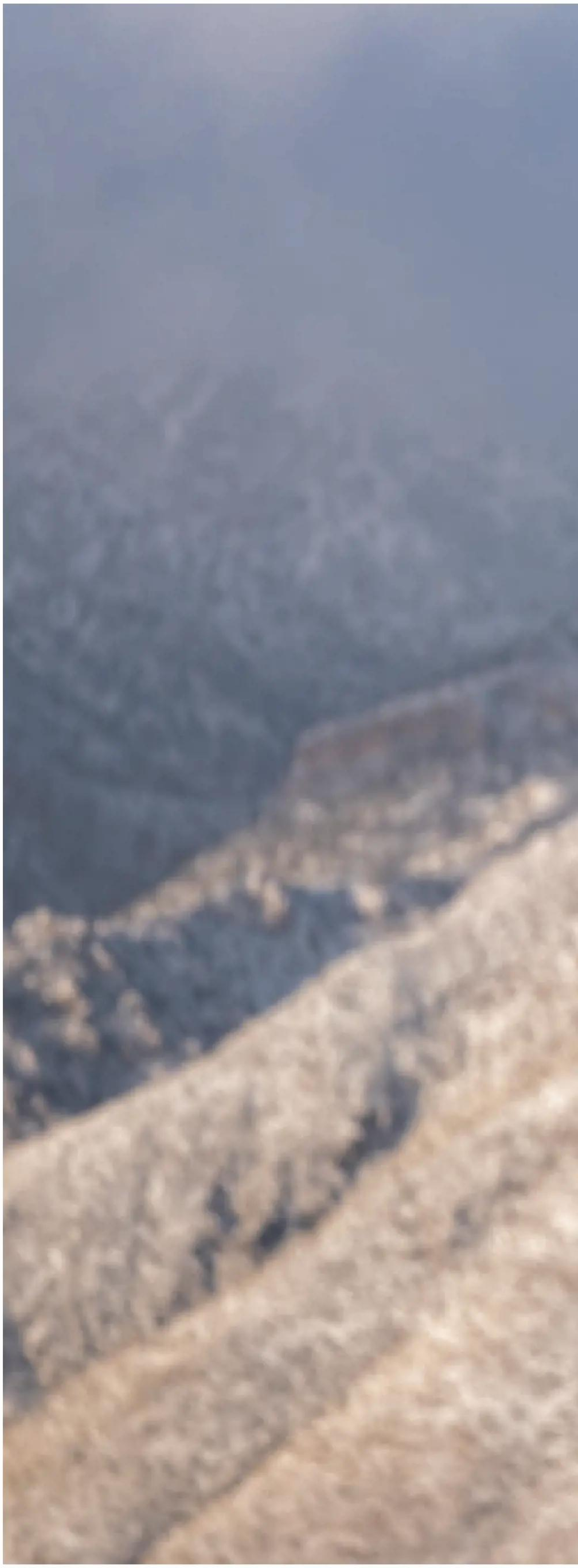
Photo: Foster Denney

On Sight



Sean McLane and Andy Knight climb steep ice on the Shining Wall in Zion National Park. "A place that stands out from all the others with the highest density of steep ice lines on such a massive scale, The Shining Wall is a league of its own with the most outstanding, otherworldly climbs," Knight wrote on Instagram in February 2024. Vitaliy Musiyenko





Jordan Cargill checks his rack on his way up Reppy's Crack (5.8), an alternative start to the first pitch of Moby Grape on Cannon Cliff in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Brent Doscher

Genevive Walker assesses the next move on Commanders' Quest (5.10b) in southern Nevada. Elaina Arenz established the route, in the Blue Diamond Cave area, in 2022. Irene Yee

COLN

Ermanno Salvaterra swings his tools into the rime mushrooms of the upper west ridge of Cerro Torre in November 2005. Salvaterra and his climbing partners, Rolando Garibotti and Alessandro Beltrami, continued on to complete the first ascent of El Arca de los Vientos (5.11a C1). Salvaterra died after a fall on Italy's Campanile Alto in 2023. Rolando Garibotti

EDELRID
BOOSTIC
SCARPA

Séb Berthe fights through snow and wind on the fourteenth pitch (5.14d) of the Dawn Wall on El Capitan. Berthe sent the pitch on his second day of attemps while dealing with back pain. On January 31, he became the fourth person ever to free the Dawn Wall. Berthe dedicated his climb to the fight against fascism. "Being antifascist means rejecting all forms of oppression," he wrote on Instagram. Chris Natalie

ON BELAY

In Search of the Thumb | *Robbie Phillips*

Cold, dark, churning waves slap against the wooden hull of the rowboat as the men pull at the oars. Their arms strain against the relentless currents of the North Atlantic. Though no words are spoken, a quiet unease lingers among the crew. Ahead looms the towering sea stack they have come to climb, black and jagged against the grey sky.

A young man reaches for the rope—about twenty-five meters of hand-braided horsehair, slick and wet from years of salt and toil. Its fibers are worn, split and feathered from scraping against cliffs and tying boats to moorings, yet still it endures. He ties it firmly around his waist, his fingers rough and steady despite the tremble of the boat beneath him.

The others ready themselves, gripping the oars tighter to stabilize the craft while the barefooted apprentice—his feet calloused from years of climbing—stands and carefully steps to the edge of the boat. He watches the waves, counting each one, his eyes darting from the barnacle-encrusted rock to the slimy seaweed clinging to it. The boat rises with the swell, rocking violently, and the moment comes—he leaps.

His feet slam onto the rock, sticking firm, and a cheer erupts from the boat. Behind him, one man feeds out the rope, careful not to let it snag, while the others fight to keep the boat steady in the roiling sea.

The climber glances back at his companions, a brief grin flashes across his face. This is his first climb on Stac Biorach, a rite of passage for young St. Kildan men. Many don't succeed on their first attempt, hence the rope so that his companions can pull him back aboard if he should fall into the choppy waters.

He turns to face the next part of his journey, a treacherous traverse around the stack. Up ahead, past the sharp turn of rock, there lies *the move*, known to all St. Kildans as the Thumb, unavoidable to those who want to reach the ledges where the birds nest. If he's successful, it will affirm his status within the community.

Committing to the climb, the man grapples with the rough-textured rock as the wall steepens. His toes, as rough as they are sensitive, explore and find edges to latch as he maintains body tension with an innate knowing. Looking left, he spots a small ledge—this is *the move*. With handholds disappearing, he has only one option: build momentum and

[Photo] **Robbie Phillips eyes the next unknown pitch while belaying Will Birkett on the first ascent of Somerled (E7/8 or ca. 5.13+) on the Great Wall of Soay, St. Kilda, in 2023. A few aid moves were used on their ground-up ascent of the five-pitch line.** Ryan Balharry swing his left foot onto the protruding stone. Drawing on a lifetime of climbing and instincts shaped by generations of St. Kildans before him, he rocks over, shifting his weight from hands to feet until his center of gravity aligns, perfectly balanced atop the plinth. With no handholds to steady himself, he pauses, shifting his balance with small, deliberate adjustments of his hips. Then he sees it: a small, thumb-like protrusion jutting out above a deep gap in the rock. He reaches for it slowly … slowly … got it! A wave of relief courses through him as he steadies himself.

Below, the men in the rowboat watch with quiet admiration. Each of them has done this before, but not without at least one tumble into the cold sea. He made it look effortless—a natural.

He looks ahead as a cacophony of squawks and guttural gargles erupts from the white, guano-coated ledges. Wings beat furiously and the occasional jet of orange or green bile arcs through the air, spewed toward him by fulmars guarding their single eggs. Little do they know, they'll soon be joining him for dinner—his dinner.

Life on St. Kilda was undoubtedly arduous. Yet, amid the challenges, the islands possessed a unique bounty: a perpetual and plentiful food source in the form of seabirds and their eggs. From their youth, St. Kildan men honed their skills in capturing these winged creatures that nested on the cliffs. In turn, they cultivated a remarkable repertoire of rock-climbing skills that were passed down through generations. Because they scaled the sheer faces mostly barefooted, their feet acquired an almost prehensile dexterity, leading early speculators to suggest it was an evolutionary adaptation tailored for enhanced climbing prowess. But any modern-day climber would understand this as simply the effects of a lifetime of dedication to climbing. (After two decades of stuffing my feet into climbing shoes, mine probably don't look too dissimilar to a St. Kildan's!) But climbing wasn't simply a means of survival; it was deeply ingrained within their cultural fabric. The most skilled climbers held heightened status within the community, and as legend would tell, young men couldn't take a wife until they'd passed a test of vertigo, standing on one leg and bowing while on the edge of the Mistress Stone, a rock leaning precipitously at the edge of a cliff.

My introduction to the legendary St. Kildan climbers came through a book penned in the seventeenth century by the Gaelic scholar Martin Martin, *A Late Voyage to St. Kilda.* Captivated by their climbing prowess, Martin chronicled their ascents, particularly highlighting a climb they christened the Thumb, so named for a difficult section that, as Martin attested, could only be mastered with the unwavering support of the climber's own thumb:

Of all the Parts of a Man's Body, the Thumb only can lay hold on it, and that must be only for the Space of one Minute; during which Time his Feet have no Support, nor any Part of his Body touch the Stone … at which Minute he must jump by the help of his Thumb … to a sharp Point of the Rock, which, when he has got hold of, puts him above Danger.

The tale of the Thumb struck a chord within me, reminding me more of a modern indoor boulder problem than a conventional rock route. There's a common belief that technical rock climbing began in the Victorian era, so the notion that a ragged group of hardened Gaels were executing such moves hundreds, if not thousands, of years before struck me as totally outrageous! The significance attached to the climb's name resonated even more deeply. As an avid new-router myself, the act of naming a climb stands as one of my favorite parts of the process. It's not about ownership; it's about connecting a piece of ourselves and our experiences to the rock. Envisioning those ancient climbers beneath the sea stack, deliberating over how to get up it, endeavoring to navigate the treacherous crux section—with some plunging into the icy cold waters below, only for another to step forward and attempt the challenge anew—elicited not only a sense of awe but also a feeling of affinity with them.

[Photo] **St. Kildans row out to the sea stacks, where they were likely headed to harvest eggs and birds. The islands were inhabited until 1930.** National Trust for Scotland

And yet, I found myself pondering: Was the Thumb even real, or was it merely an embellishment woven into the fabric of St. Kilda's history by the imaginative pen of Martin Martin? This contemplation served as just one impetus for my return to the islands.

A hundred miles off mainland Scotland and forty miles beyond the Outer Hebrides, St. Kilda stands as the westernmost outpost of Scotland—a solitary landmark before the vast, daunting 3,500-mile stretch of the Atlantic to North America. As expedition guide Dörte Pietron once remarked to me while we climbed together in the Basque Country, "It would be easier planning an expedition to East Greenland than St. Kilda!"

There's no airport, and a boat service from the Isle of Harris only gets you as far as Hirta, the largest island. The smaller isles are guarded by sheer, black cliffs plunging vertically into the sea, as if daring anyone to approach. A good sailboat, and an even better skipper, is the only way to get to those. Even then, success depends entirely on the mercurial sea state, which on most days of the year will simply refuse you entry.

And if you do manage to land, there's another obstacle: timing. The climbing season is dictated by the birds, as their nesting renders much of the rock inaccessible from May to August. Climbing during the nesting season would not be fun for us, or for our avian companions. This leaves a narrow window, a few weeks on either side of summer, to even stand a chance. But venturing out later in the season remains a heady gamble, because there is always a looming threat of inclement weather, and even distant tempests brewing thousands of miles out in the Atlantic can produce heavy swells that render the seacliffs inaccessible. Climbers, kayakers and other adventurous tourists often spend years dreaming of St. Kilda, only to have their plans dashed by its famously unforgiving conditions.

LA SPORTIVA
DREAM BIG
EDGE SMALL

La Sportiva athlete ALEX HONNOLD wears the TC PRO on the RAINBOW TRIPLE linkup
Red Rock, Las Vegas · Photo: ©Drew Smith

LASPORTIVAUSA.COM

MADE WITH

GUARANTEED TO KEEP YOU DRY

GORE-TEX

Welcome to nature

The trollveggen collection
For first ascents and demanding climbs.

Our mission is to create the greatest outdoor products and offer unique adventures. Crafted with quality, function, design, and sustainability through four generations since 1929.

Adventures: If you want to travel here or to one of our unique lodges, we offer great packages or tailor-made adventures.
Norrøna Stores: New York, Boston, Boulder, Castle Rock.

NORRØNA®

norrona.com

The archipelago comprises a handful of rocky isles that are mostly fashioned from hard, silvery-black gabbro, a rugged igneous rock that was ejected from the earth's crust some sixty billion years ago. The islands emerge dramatically from the murky depths, their sheer cliffs resembling the jagged spines of a colossal sea creature.

Despite the harsh, unforgiving environment, life thrives here in astonishing abundance. Around one million birds nest here in the breeding season, including Manx shearwaters, kittiwakes, gannets, fulmars and half of the UK's puffin population. Yet what truly imbues St. Kilda with an air of mystique is its human history. There is evidence of intermittent human occupation of the islands dating back more than 4,000 years, and continuous occupation for 2,000 years. The saga of the resilient populace that made their homes here has been meticulously chronicled in literature, film and television documentaries, in particular the events leading to the islands' eventual evacuation in 1930. St. Kilda's unique blend of natural beauty, marine conservation and cultural heritage has earned it the rare distinction of being designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for both natural and cultural significance, one of a very small number of such sites worldwide.

As A CLIMBER, I get the most joy from exploring remote areas in search of new crags and boulders. I often find the hunt for rock to be just as exciting as the climbing itself, sometimes even more so. St. Kilda was a dream come true for me, with some of the best rock I've ever climbed on, and the most impressive seacliffs I've ever seen, but they are also the most difficult to access.

On my first trip in 2022, we completed the first ascent of an incredible 100-meter near-vertical slab nestled on the northwestern tip of the isle of Soay. The obsidian expanse of gabbro cascaded seamlessly into the ocean, adorned with a singular, awe-inspiring crack splitting the central facade. The sun was setting swiftly to the west as I belayed my climbing partners Will Birkett and Guy Robertson up to join me. Hamish Frost, our photographer, sat beside me, his phone suddenly buzzing as it caught a rare flicker of signal. He glanced at the screen, then at me.

"The Queen's dead."

And so the name came to me—the Last Queen of Scotland (E5, or about 5.11+). A name born from time, place and the weight of a fleeting moment.

During that same trip, beyond the rugged ridgeline that demarcates the northwestern slab from its more southerly counterpart, we stumbled upon what we christened the Great Wall of Soay. Here, a vertiginous 200-meter overhang thrusts defiantly over the churning sea, adorned with colossal cracks and protruding gabbro formations from base to summit. I knew I would have to come back for this!

Upon my return in September 2023, after we'd endured two queasy days at sea, fortune smiled upon us. Our first morning dawned with a canvas of cerulean skies stretched overhead,

[Photo] **Phillips follows a thin crack on the first ascent of the Last Queen of Scotland (E5, or about 5.11+). He climbed the route with Birkett, Guy Robertson and photographer Hamish Frost during his first trip to St. Kilda.** Hamish Frost

Despite the harsh, unforgiving environment, life thrives here in astonishing abundance.

accompanied by a refreshing breeze. As our sailboat, *Somerled*, a thirty-seven-foot cruiser-racer, skirted the coastline, the black gabbro of the neighboring island, Dun, caught the sun's rays, glistening as if completely sodden. But it was just an illusion, a trick of the sheen of the rock, and it was actually bone-dry. It had been a year since my last visit, and already my memories of this place seemed shrouded in a haze. A sense of apprehension crept over me as we drew nearer to the imposing wall, and concerned thoughts took shape at the forefront of my mind.

What if the wall isn't as good as you remember? You've dragged Will, Ryan, Hugo and Scott out here on a fool's errand. What if you can't even climb the thing? What if it's too hard, too steep, too featureless?! What if you're just not good enough?

As *Somerled* carried us closer, skirting the southern tip of Soay, the Great Wall of Soay was gradually unveiled. First the upper headwall came into sight, its dark green lichenous walls blending into the grassy verges above, then the overhang … In that moment, a fire ignited in my belly, burning off the uneasy thoughts I'd just had. As our skipper, Scott Johnston, readied the small rigid inflatable boat (RIB) to take us in to the wall, Will and I busied ourselves with organizing our gear.

WILL COMES FROM WHAT I'd call "climbing royalty." The Birkett name carries significant weight in the UK, particularly in the Lake District, where Will's family has deep roots. His father, Bill, is a renowned climber and writer, but it was Will's cousin Dave Birkett—responsible for some of the boldest and hardest traditional climbs in the UK—who took Will under his wing. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Will and I first met in early 2018. I was climbing at an indoor wall in a small town near where I was working a speaking gig and got to chatting with a nice young woman. It was purely platonic, and as we climbed, I mentioned that I needed a place to crash for the night. She kindly offered her place, but said she'd need to check with her boyfriend first.

Her boyfriend (Will, as you've probably guessed) was less than thrilled. "But it's Robbie Phillips!" she said, as if my name carried some miraculous persuasive power.

I ended up spending the night in her room while they stayed in her van. The next day, we all went climbing together and, somehow, Will and I hit it off. Fast-forward to now, and he's not just my climbing partner but one of my best mates.

Will and I have been in some gnarly places together. A few years ago, we barely scraped our way out of a seacliff on the remote isle of Mingulay. I'd fallen off the crux pitch twenty times before miraculously sending it in the setting sun. From there, a desperate race to the top in strong winds, topping out in total darkness, was rewarded with the

[Facing Page] **Phillips looks ahead after slotting a large cam behind a wide, flaky crack on the Great Wall of Soay. Earlier on the pitch, a hold broke, sending Phillips on a swinging fall into the side of Birkett's head.** | [This Page] **Phillips and Birkett lay out their sleeping bags and take shelter in a small cave near the top of the cliff (which was unfortunately full of sheep poop). Stormy weather and rough seas prevented the rigid inflatable boat (RIB) from being able to safely retrieve them until the morning.** Ryan Balharry (both)

first ascent of an E8 6c (5.13+) we named Kildochka. Will and I have also stumbled through the streets of Sheffield at 8 a.m. after an all-night bender, clutching each other for stability while heatedly debating where we parked the vans. The skills to get through both are surprisingly similar: take it slow, trust each other and try not to fall.

With Will tossing ropes and laden rucksacks into the RIB, Scott's deft hands coaxed the diesel engine to life. The scent of fuel and salt filled the air, a potent reminder of last year's harrowing misadventures on St. Kilda and Mingulay.

As the RIB battled against the cresting waves, Scott skillfully navigated us toward the wall. The intense chop of the waves subsided noticeably as the curvature of the bay we were entering protected us somewhat from the swell. As we drew nearer, the sheer magnitude of the Great Wall of Soay loomed before us, appearing even more formidable than I had imagined. Scott steered us toward what seemed like a viable docking point, only to find ourselves ensnared by a menacing eddy of boiling backwash as we approached the ledge where we hoped to disembark. Scott swiftly maneuvered the RIB to escape. His usual composed demeanor became one of apprehension, with beads of sweat glistening on his brow.

"That was too close, lads!" he shouted above the engine and crashing waves. "We can't afford to make a mistake here—if we lose the RIB, we're fucked!"

I spotted a safer entry point to the right, though it would require a much bigger jump onto the rock. With precise timing amid the waves, Scott positioned the RIB against the rock and screamed for us to jump. Will made a leap of faith and became the first to make landfall. Minutes later, I followed suit, and together we watched as Scott returned to ferry our friends Ryan Balharry and Hugo Saunders, who had joined us to capture our attempt on camera.

As we approached the starting point of the climb, some small, brown, goatlike sheep observed us with curious eyes. Remnants of the island's earliest human settlements, which date to as far back as the Iron Age, these woolly creatures thrive on the rugged landscape, seemingly indifferent to human presence. To access the wall, we had to scramble up a steep grassy verge and rappel sixty meters to a ledge. I then navigated along a massive horizontal dike to where I suspected our climb would begin. A year of anticipation in which we had meticulously studied a high-resolution image of the wall suddenly gave way to a sobering realization—the features on the cliff were far grander than I'd envisioned. The nerves got to me a bit, and Will graciously took the first pitch.

Despite being the least overhanging section of the wall, Pitch 1 still presented steep climbing on less-than-ideal rock. The occasional dislodged piece shattered against the cliff, cascading shrapnel into the water below. Undeterred, Will pressed on, grunting and breathing heavily until he secured himself on a small belay ledge. Seconding the pitch, I relished the climbing while silently grappling with apprehension for what was ahead.

At the belay stance, we discussed the difficulty of the pitch, suspecting that it had to be a solid E4 (5.11c)—an assessment made even more daunting by the realization that this was merely the beginning. It was clear that escape off this route would be nearly impossible, or at least very difficult and time-consuming. The cliff was so steep that abseiling would require tedious down-aiding to avoid being stranded in space.

Pitch 2 started at a thirty-five-degree angle, tracing a faint crack line amid towering bubbles of cement-like rock. While the climbing experience was undeniably world-class, the rock quality was less so. I mused that with regular ascents, the route might clean up over time, but the remote nature of this seacliff would make such prospects unlikely.

Every meter brought heightened challenge. I used all the skills I'd honed from years of climbing, especially the techniques I'd learned in the steep limestone caves in Spain and France. Kneebars, drop-knees, heel-toes—this was the most gymnastic, three-dimensional trad climbing I'd ever done!

As he began to follow the pitch, Will quickly realized that it was just too steep to second with a pack on, so he resigned himself to getting up it by pulling on as much gear as possible. But even that was too hard, and before long he let go and swung out into space.

Looking down from my hanging belay, I saw Will spinning round, the half ropes tangling in a colorful mess. Will waited until the spinning stopped before constructing a prusik to ascend. He ascended the thin half ropes. Eventually he arrived at the belay, sweating.

"Your lead?" I suggested with a meek smile.

Between heavy breaths he replied, "Ha! I think you're gonna … have to take … this one, mate."

A part of me was terrified by the prospect of leading the rest of this climb. But a bigger part of me was thrilled!

When people think of Scotland, they often envision dark, brooding clouds, fierce winds and a myriad of terms for rainfall: *dreich*, *mizzle*, *dank*, among others. Yet Scottish summers can be surprisingly hot, with high humidity. It was these conditions we found ourselves in on the Great Wall. Just a few meters into the third pitch, my hands were drenched in sweat. A break in the clouds would have been welcome, but none was forthcoming. Committed, I felt my stress levels peaking as I grappled with greasy slopers on suspect rock. Sweat drenched my swollen forearms, which glistened in the burning sun as I quested uncertainly into the unknown.

"Arghhhhhh … WATCH ME HERE!"

"I've got you, man!" Will encouraged.

I was thrutching my way up, throwing for holds I wasn't even sure existed, shoving gear into the wall and praying that it was good.

"I'M OFF!"

I let go and slumped onto the rope. It wasn't even a big fall. The gear was fine. It felt like a bit of a letdown. After a short break, I had another crack at it and took the same underwhelming fall. And again … I shouted more curses.

"This is so much harder than I expected!"

The burning heat of the sun on my pasty Scottish body didn't help, but I knew I couldn't fall off too many more times. We needed to get up this thing one way or another, and every fall was time and energy wasted. I resorted to aiding through the one move to reach a better hand jam, good gear and a glorious hand crack to another hanging belay. The pitch felt to be about E8 6c (5.13c). Tackling it ground up under the relentless sun was just too much. And Will was counting on me to get us to the top.

I started the next pitch with confidence because it didn't look as hard as what we had just overcome. Looking up, I could see an obvious line of wide fissures leading to an enormous barreling overhang; a wide, gaping chimney breached the steepest part.

"Watch me here," I warned Will as I reached for a suspect hold. "I'm about to grab a …" SNAP. "Argghhhhhh!" *Thump!*

The swinging fall had sent me straight into the side of Will's head.

"I think I'm a bit concussed," Will muttered before flashing a cheeky grin. "Nah, I'll be fine."

I pulled on and climbed back to the highpoint. A fresh rock scar was visible where the hold had been. As I ventured higher into the steepness, the crack system widened into a spacious corner that I could wedge my body inside. Above me the wall barreled over, with a crack leading the way to salvation. Reaching as high as I could, I plugged in the largest cam I had. The crack swallowed it, spitting particles of grit and rubble into my eyes. I blindly wrestled with the yawning fissure, squinting my eyes shut, thrutching and grunting as I squeezed and contorted my fists for any form of purchase. An unusual blend of exhaustion and exhilaration rushed through me as the overhang succumbed and I flopped my sweaty, dusty body onto a furry lichenous slab like a beached whale.

When Will hoisted himself over the lip, his bloodshot eyes widened with an intense smile that danced precariously somewhere between relief and madness.

"I used to think people should enjoy doing stuff like this, pushing themselves outside of their comfort zones," he joked, locking eyes with me. "But I was wrong, I was so wrong! They should just go and do nice things and have a nice time."

We both burst into a fit of laughter. *Thank God I haven't completely broken him*, I thought.

At the belay, we were relieved to finally be able to stand on our feet and give our hips some rest from hanging in our harnesses. Yet one big pitch loomed ahead before the final scramble off the face, and the sun was swiftly setting. There was an obvious diagonal crack that we had planned to finish on, but as I moved up into it, the truth unfolded—it was sheer choss, laden with fragmented shards of precarious blocks that crumbled at my touch. To the right was an overhanging face composed of rock akin to the first two pitches, a grand display of bulbous cement blobs. It was devoid of obvious cracks that would accept gear, but its allure was undeniable.

"I'm gonna try going right, man!"

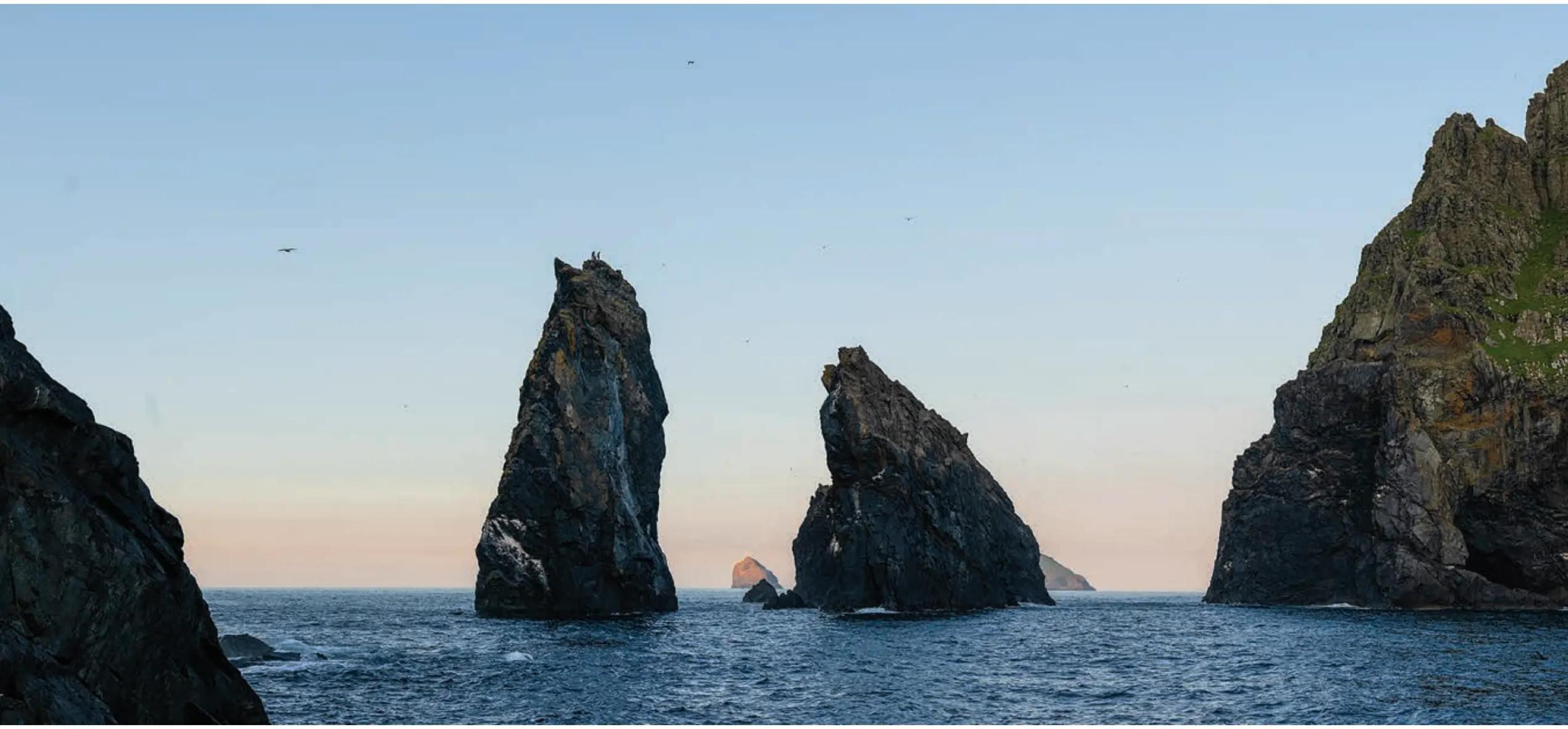
" 'Av it, laddie!"

Beginning the fifth pitch with a cautious pace, I sidled across until my movements settled into a steady rhythm. What lay ahead surpassed all expectations—an expanse of colossal, rounded, juggy flakes beckoning me diagonally across the face, guiding my ascent through a line of striated pockets, each a source of unadulterated climbing euphoria! It's in moments like these, when the level of challenge is proportionate to both the exposure and the commitment, that the true essence of climbing unfolds. At each rest I paused to lean back and soak in my surroundings, suspended high above the crashing waves.

After topping out onto a ledge, I belayed Will up, and it was a rare moment in which we embraced—typical British men, reserving hugs for either a drunken stupor or those rare, life-affirming instances when we've just accomplished something truly remarkable. Completing a new route on an uncharted seacliff in a remote corner of Scotland alongside a good friend certainly seemed to qualify. We named our route Somerled (E7/8, or about 5.13+), an homage to our skipper Scott's sturdy vessel, as well as to its namesake, the Viking-Gaelic lord who left his mark on the western Scottish isles in the twelfth century.

While we'd been climbing, however, the sea conditions had taken a turn for the worse. Scott's voice crackled through the radio, advising us to find shelter for the night and reassess our escape in the morning.

Just a few meters into the third pitch, my hands were drenched in sweat.



[Photo] **Stac Biorach, left, climbed by St. Kildans. "The Inhabitants of St. Kilda," Martin Martin wrote, "are much happier than the generality of Mankind, as being almost the only People in the World who feel the Sweetness of true Liberty."** Ryan Balharry

Near the top of the cliff, we found a small cave, its floor thick with what must've been a millennia's worth of sheep droppings. Too exhausted to care, we unrolled our sleeping bags, and as soon as my head hit the grass pillow at the cave's edge, not even the pungent stench of sheep shit could keep me from sleep.

The next morning the sea state was better, but still not ideal. The platform we'd landed on was now underwater, and to get off the island we had to balance on the edge of a slippery wet boulder and time our jumps into Scott's RIB with the rise and fall of the swell.

Back on *Somerled*, we had a bit of time to relax, but our journey wasn't over yet; our second objective awaited just around the corner. Though the technical challenge of retracing an ancient bird-hunting route on a remote sea stack might seem less daunting, the question of its very existence still lay unanswered.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, ABOARD *Somerled*, we traced the coastline of Hirta, finally setting our sights on the trio of rugged pillars jutting from the tempestuous seas: Stac Shoaigh, Stac Dona and Stac Biorach. Among them, Stac Dona, immortalized in Martin Martin's accounts, appeared underwhelming to say the least. I struggled to envision it harboring the legendary Thumb route. It barely stood ten meters above the water and lacked any signs of avian habitation. The other two sea stacks seemed more promising, as they were much bigger and more in keeping with what I'd constitute as a challenging climb. Yet it was Stac Biorach that beckoned me. Towering around seventy meters high, its pillar-like structure mirrored Martin's descriptions, and through binoculars I spotted the unmistakable signs of avian life: ledges coated in mounds of white guano about twenty meters above the waterline.

Eager for a closer look, we leaped into the RIB and sped toward the rock.

"It does look a bit like a thumb, doesn't it?" Will remarked.

But then surely every sea stack does, I thought. *There must be more to it.*

As we drew closer, the imposing west face loomed larger, its steepness and verdant hue far more pronounced than the binoculars had suggested. In that moment, a wave of uncertainty washed over me, eroding my confidence.

"Do you think the St. Kildans would have climbed up that steep wall there?" Will asked.

"I don't think so, man. That looks hard and completely unprotected. They were good climbers, but not that good!"

The guano-covered ledges were now directly above us, but accessing them would be tricky. As Will and Scott chatted and pointed at the rock, looking for ways to get up it, I tried to imagine myself as a St. Kildan from hundreds of years ago. *I've got a small wooden rowboat with a small crew … I'm barefooted with no modern gear … It has to be an easy access point, otherwise they just wouldn't try.*

"Scott, can we go farther round the stack?" I said. "I think there must be a traverse in or something."

The diesel engine emitted a garbled, spluttering protest as Scott revved the RIB into action. As we skirted the circumference of the stack, a clearer vision emerged: a potential route snaking from some barnacle-covered ledges, encircling the stack and finally culminating on the guano-coated ledges we'd already seen.

"This must be it, guys!" I said. "I can totally imagine the St. Kildans jumping onto the rock and traversing round there and up. It would need to be a super-calm sea like today, but it's certainly possible!"

Will and I leaped onto the rock, followed closely by Scott, who had opted to join us. Scott grabbed a small anchor he'd extended with climb-

[Photo] **Phillips rappels from Stac Biorach. When R.M. Barrington climbed it in the 1800s, he wrote in the *Alpine Journal*, "My thoughts were not, I fear, ornithological, but rather ... 'How shall I ever get down?'"** Ryan Balharry

ing rope and sent it plunging into the sea. With bated breath, we observed as the current seized hold of the RIB, tugging it around the stack until, abruptly, it halted in its tracks …

"Thank god for that!" exclaimed Scott.

In my mind's eye, I envisioned myself as a young St. Kildan, barefooted and tethered only by a coarse horsehair rope around my waist. While I had always considered Martin's accounts of the Thumb to be a somewhat fanciful interpretation of his observations, the possibility that they held a kernel of truth had firmly entrenched itself in my thoughts, compelling me to remain vigilant for any moves along the route that might fit the description. The start of the climb was just ledge shuffling along the west face of the tower, still so close to the sea that the myriad barnacles provided increased friction underfoot. As I traversed around, there was a sudden transition as the rock kicked back and the movement became a bit more technical.

For a moment, I found myself delicately smearing on small footholds and sloping hands, acutely aware of the sparse protection that offered little assurance against a plunge into the sea below. Ahead of me was a mushroom-shaped plinth nestled beneath a shallow, concave scoop in the face.

This is a textbook rock-over, I thought. Throwing my foot up onto the ledge, I drew my hips in close to the wall and hugged my body tightly against the scoop. The incline threatened to propel me backward into the glimmering sunlit waters below. Though my hands found less purchase, I methodically palmed at the rock's surface until, at last, I managed to reorient myself to face the guano-coated ledges. That move, exposed and pretty darn technical, required a good understanding of body positioning. *Perhaps the St. Kildans had climbed it like I had, but utilizing their thumbs to maintain their balance on top of the mushroom?* As I turned to the guano-covered ledges, a small "thumb-like" protrusion was the only hold I could reach. *Perhaps this was what the St. Kildans named it for?*

At the guano ledges, we made our first belay and discussed the possibility of that being the move Martin saw. I was pretty sure it was.

Although the tower was only seventy meters tall, the route wound around it, and we swapped leads several times to prevent too much rope drag and maintain communication. The climbing wasn't too hard, but it was exposed and adventurous in style. Will led the final pitch and belayed us up onto the summit. There, the three of us paused, hugged it out and relished this moment that I'd been thinking about for the last year. I harbored no doubt the St. Kildans had climbed this; it demanded boldness and commitment, but it wasn't unimaginable, akin to a British VS (5.7/5.8) by modern standards, well within their reach.

Regaining some clarity amid our excitement, we cast our gaze about in search of any trace left by any who may have ventured here before, but found nothing. Understandable, really; it was an era well before climbers started fixing anchors to the rock, and given the passage of over 130 years since the last confirmed ascent, any remnants they might have left behind would have long since vanished.

With the sun dipping low on the horizon, Will and Scott descended the stack via abseil, leaving me alone on the summit for a final moment of reflection. I sat for a while on the rock, staring out at the sea and thinking of the last St. Kildan to climb this. *They probably didn't know they'd be the last of them to do so.* In a desperate bid to capture the moment, I took my phone out, pointed it toward myself and pushed record, but I had nothing. It had taken me a whole year to pull together the resources to make this climb happen, and now that I was finally here, having accomplished what I'd dreamed of, I was speechless. Perhaps I was silenced under the immense weight of history, standing where St. Kildan men had likely once stood centuries before, surveying the vast expanse of sea before them. We may have been centuries apart, and our lives couldn't have been more different, yet we shared this one thing in common: climbing.

I heard some shouts. It was time to leave. I abseiled down the stack and, guided by the rope held by Will, landed straight inside the rubber vessel. We pulled the ropes, which slithered into the sea as they fell. The engine spluttered. Scott made a pass just under the stack, and as I looked back through the darkness, I noticed something else: the shape of the plinth we'd been balancing on at *the move*—it looked remarkably like a thumb!

On our last morning, *Somerled* took us out of Village Bay and into the Atlantic. Grey storm clouds gathered. As the swell grew, I watched the grassy slopes of Hirta slowly lose their color. The vertiginous cliffs of Boreray disappeared behind the rolling waves until the last shadows of land faded into the horizon. St. Kilda was gone, just a memory that seems to balance between the edge of the world and imagination, a place we can only just touch but never fully grasp. ∎

[For more in-depth history about St. Kilda, see Natalie Berry's story "Over the Edge and Off the Map" in Issue 65 (2019). The conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of St. Kilda makes responsible access extremely important. It is possible to climb in some areas of the archipelago without disturbing nesting birds. Climbers are required to liaise with National Trust for Scotland staff beforehand and acknowledge the sensitivity of the islands and their remoteness from medical services.—Ed.]

Metolius
CLIMBING

New Gear From Metolius

Basic Stick Clip
Twelve foot telescoping stick clip complete with Superclip™.

Metolius
Superclip™

Roll Up Stick Clip Kit
Rolls up to fit in a chalk bag and extends to ten feet. Kit comes complete with Superclip™ and camera mount.

Crack Glove
Friction backed, open palm crack climbing glove.

Captive Quickdraw
The ultimate sport climbing quickdraw.
Locking Anchor Draw
Super secure quickdraw.

Nose Cone
Reduces hangups, creates quick access storage and keeps your bag dry.
Fits any standard size haul bag.

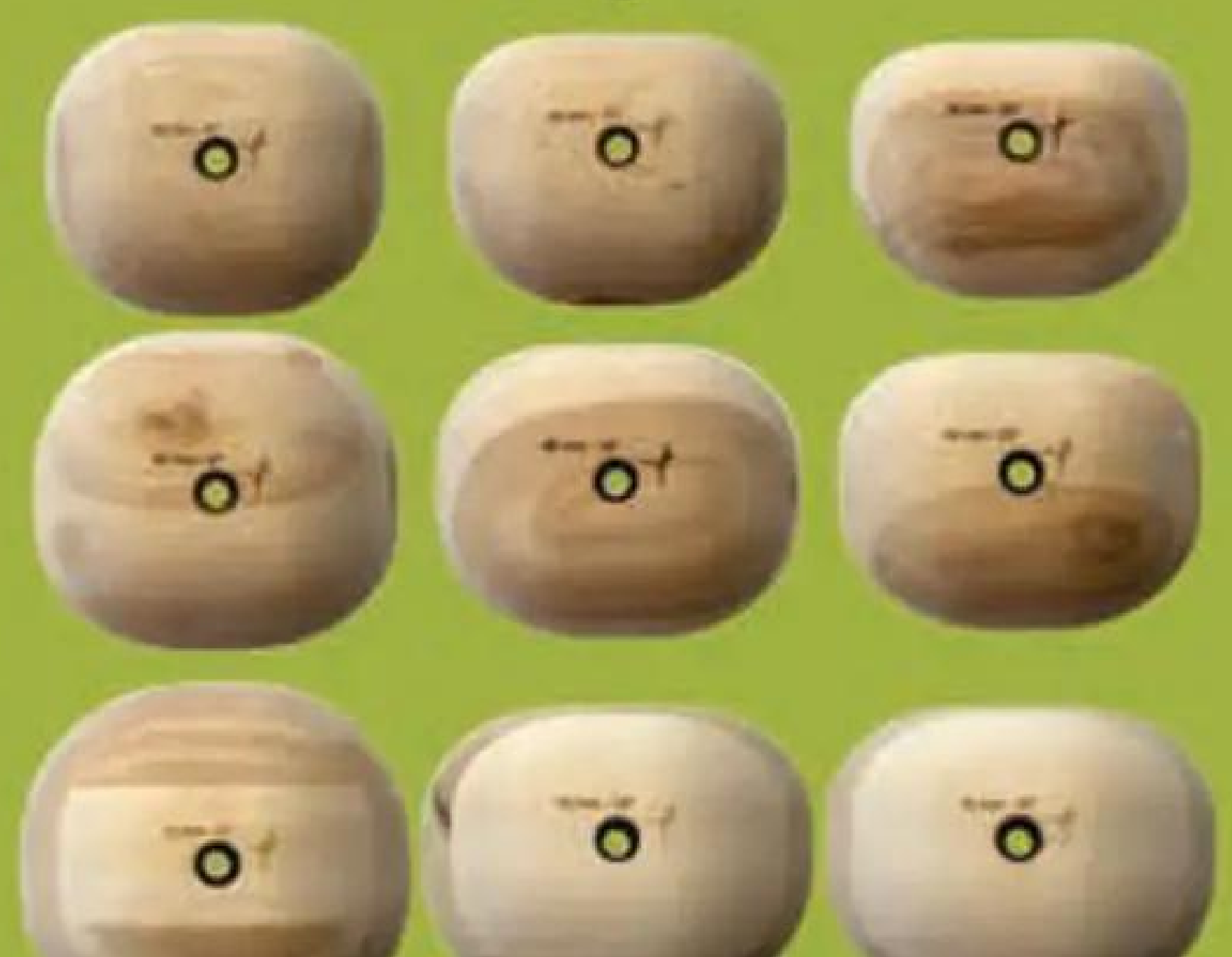
Crash Pad Carry Bag
Great for traveling with your pad.
Fits a standard size crash pad.

Pinch

Edge

Pocket

Sloper



System Holds
Very comprehensive selection of wood system wall holds.

www.metoliusclimbing.com

The Measure of a Day

I CAME UP CLIMBING in a time and place that was short on grades. In the 1990s, the routes on the sandstone bluffs and boulders that lined the wide river valley of southwest Colorado felt wild and sandbagged. At seventeen years old, I had in mind to be an alpinist—a sailor on those screaming seas of stone in Patagonia, an explorer on shrouded domes and peaks that were yet to be found. Though the routes around my hometown of Durango were minuscule compared to the peaks I longed for, they were enshrouded in legend, secrecy and doubt, with descriptions of poor gear and plain fear.

I longed for a baseline, a benchmark, something I could hold *on to*—namely, a grade, a number; an indicator telling me, *You've made it here, now you can go there.* But such reassurance was difficult to grasp and hold, much like the cobble that peels away from the cliffs high above Camp Bird Mine Road.

The people establishing new routes around those parts then were kinda misty figures—*reserved* would be a gentle term. When they put a number on a thing, it was often a tongue-in-cheek affair: a winking, nodding collusion that set a tone for the area and ascensionist alike.

Teenage me and a bro or two would spend our days in hot pursuit of what were the most basic lines. We climbed cracks and cliffs and dihedrals, short little jaunts on soft sandstone, topropes hung from rusted pins, and roadside blocks with a single pad. It seemed we would epic half our days away just scraping to survive.

Years went by along with several jobs, above and under the table. I'd saved up pennies, purchased picks and set to sharpening my craft across the south San Juans. Midafternoon I'd come a-hitching down the hill from some chosstastic southwest chute of tottering conglomerate or pale blue stair-stepped icefall, gripped and wrapped in red and black layers, trying to move fast and light with rattled nerves, talking to myself, channeling the phrases of Mark Twight. I'd stop by a little crag at the edge of town, where I'd run into the local crew bouldering in the sun. I felt a little bashful then, shedding Gore-Tex like a snake to struggle up some moderate boulder that had first been climbed in short shorts and high-top shoes well before my birth. Meanwhile this here crew of tanned and talented *bloc* artists with cabled arms and sunburnt smiles would smoothly lap any line I'd fumble, latching the holds in seamless, static motions.

All my inquiries on grades were met with cool detachment and a gentle chiding. The scale went something like this: "This one's good for warming up" (barely). "That one's sweet as hell" (significantly harder). "That thing is AMAZING" (hard as a coffin nail and probably first climbed by the person giving the beta). "And that one's never going" (best and only way you'd get a project revealed). You couldn't pin these people down with a hammer and a railroad spike.

In the early 2000s we got our first climbing gym. We started spending the days on rock and nights on plastic, battering our bodies in lactic acid until our internal fires burned into crispy-fried satisfaction. The gym had grades, hallelujah, and finally I could set myself against some point of reference for the future. I still wanted to be fast and fit; I still longed

Artwork: Kellie Day

to climb *real* 5.12 in *real* mountains. Like a Dark-Aged flagellant I hammered myself with construction jobs and climbing. I didn't take a rest day for years. Didn't know they existed.

New folks moved to that little town. They had climbed at international destinations like Rifle and Yosemite, even Hueco and Fontainebleau. Slowly, grades seemed to firm up, even out here in the hinterlands.

On my first road trip to the bouldering hot spots of Joe's Valley and Little Cottonwood Canyon, I was surprised to find that I could climb as hard as V9 and V10, a thing that could still earn a passing mention in a magazine or film, if the line was purty 'nuff. I suppose it got me a free crash pad and, later down the line, some shoes.

Of course such items—the benchmarks and the laurels—stand as catalysts and marks. Of course these steps propel you. Of course you'll chase a higher grade, and leverage life, security and good sense, sometimes. In my late teens and twenties, there were days I'd be en route to sizzle through a kitchen shift, walking at a chilly clip on a crisp orange dawn from a little alleyway apartment to the back door of a restaurant, and thoughts of "the Proj" would flitter down like a leaf or birdsong from the trees. My mind would drift to moves I felt so close to linking that their gravity could be felt all the way to downtown Durango: the tense transition to a full-body squeeze on the rounded prow of stone, then balancing on a heel hook and slapping for a distant moody divot. I'd feel it just as if the barometer said "go" and the tug of work and oughta-dos was bashed into the back-of-mind by temps and timing. I walked off into the woods more than once on whim, and even if it didn't pay cash or dividends in sends, even when the rent came due or the grocery bill went growling, there was some other type of sustenance I found in the experience, a sentiment of balance and proportion that was deposited into an account that I can still draw on to this day.

And there it is, the sliding scale: the true grade of a thing, perhaps. What's it worth and what I gave, wrapped up not in just what I got, but what it was *that* day: a day for which I was there and that was the reward.

—Chris Schulte, Sierra borderlands

Artwork: Jay Alders

I Love You in the Offseason

Arriving at the Red River Gorge in early December felt a lot like walking into a living room the morning after a really fun party—most people had left, but I could still feel the energy that so recently existed here. I kind of wished I'd arrived in time for the fun, but work commitments and holiday plans in November precluded an earlier trip.

My boyfriend, Chris, and I had met less than two years before, but this was our second round of holidays together; we did not take things slow. As so many modern love stories go, we'd met on an app. We quickly realized we were both members at the climbing gym in Burlington, Vermont, and consequently spent our first date there. I remember walking into the mostly empty building and seeing him pulling his long, blond hair into a bun, his curls lit up by sunshine streaming in from the windows. I showed off on the slick pink crimps of a slabby 5.11, not mentioning it had taken me a week or two to figure out the beta. I told him about learning to climb on chossy mountains in Alaska. He shared memories of competing at this very gym when he was on a climbing team as a teenager in New Hampshire.

Soon we were spending most of our time together. I showed him around the crags in Smugglers' Notch and struggled through a lead on a 5.10a that taxed my forearms and tested my endurance. The route, which overcomes a series of small roofs that require easy but reachy moves, was far from my preferred style, but I thought he would enjoy it. I insisted on setting up the anchor at the top because I didn't realize how good of a climber he was at that point. We still laugh about how he pulled the rope and climbed to the top with ease right after I came down. Later that summer, Chris came to my Nana's eightieth birthday party; we'd forgotten to bring the ice cream, and I cried, overwhelmed by his warmth and kindness, when he offered to run to the grocery store to get it. Soon we were daydreaming about future climbing trips, our hypothetical children and sharing a home together. I moved into his tiny Burlington apartment about six months after that first date.

A year later, we were shopping for a birthday present for my dad, and a few last-minute things in anticipation of our trip to the Red, when Chris insisted on buying a number four cam. He'd read that it would be helpful for a four-pitch route he wanted to climb—I Love You in My Outside Voice. He told me about how the route's flakes and cracks should provide an easy way to the top of a pinnacle in the Northern Gorge region. "It sounds really cool," he said. *It also sounds really romantic*, I thought.

Later that week, before Thanksgiving dinner at my childhood home in Massachusetts, my sister pulled me aside and asked if I thought I was getting engaged in Kentucky. I thought of I Love You in My Outside Voice, the daydreaming Chris and I had already done about our future together and the time a few months earlier that he'd asked me what my ring size was. "I do now," I replied. Two days later, Chris and I drove 920 miles from Massachusetts to Miguel's Pizza in Kentucky in my red Subaru Outback.

We arrived in the dark, guided by the restaurant's bright yellow exterior as we pulled into the parking lot. After half a vegan pizza and a beer each, we retreated to the next building over, a four-room bunkhouse. We'd originally planned to save money by camping, but after reviewing the forecast for the week—cold and possibly a little snowy—we dished out the forty-five-dollar-per-night fee for an indoor bed and a space heater.

The next day was as cold as expected, but the Fortress Wall, where we planned to climb first, was in the sun. We had the whole crag to ourselves, so we could have climbed anything. Stubbornly we chose to stick to a plan we’d made the night before and walked around the corner and into the shadows; the temperature plummeted as we approached the base of the two-pitch route. The first pitch appeared to follow a large flake to low-angle rock and a big ledge. But we were more excited for the second pitch, a wide lightning-bolt-shaped crack that was only graded 5.6—pure fun! Still, the cold gnawed at me and I reluctantly took off my socks and approach shoes and laced up my climbing shoes. I couldn’t feel my hands or feet as I pulled up on the first move of what should have been a very easy route. I down climbed. I did this three more times before asking Chris to lead the first pitch. As he’s more than a foot taller than me, I figured he could probably just reach beyond the move that was puzzling me. Instead, his cold foot slipped off a patch of polished sandstone and he fell on the second cam he had placed. He did this one more time. We retreated to the sun.

I thought about I Love You in My Outside Voice. *Will it also be in the shade?* If my suspicions were true, was our engagement—and our eventual marriage—hinging on me being able to climb easy (albeit sandbagged) trad in the freezing cold? *Maybe it will get warmer. Maybe I’ll toughen up. Maybe he doesn’t have a ring at all!*

That evening, snow began to fall as we cooked noodles on a camp stove outside and made friends with wandering cats. I slept soundly in our little room behind the pizza shop and woke up the next morning as light started to creep in through the cracks on either side of the air conditioner that was still sitting in the window. I put my sockless feet into a pair of clogs and zipped my puffy belay jacket all the way up to my chin, not bothering to change out of my shorts. The chill hit my legs as soon as I opened the door. Looking out from the warm room at an empty field, I tried to picture what Miguel’s was be like when the campground was full: I imagined a competition on the pull-up bar, a game of pickup volleyball, rows of tents squished close together and climbers sharing stories of the day’s sends around campfires. But that morning, light snow fell into near silence from a sky full of clouds.

The bunkhouse’s metal stairs creaked underneath me as I walked around the building to the bathroom and again as I returned. I turned up the space heater and crawled back underneath the fuzzy brown blanket that had come with the room, scooching close to Chris to steal some of his body heat. The temperatures were in the low twenties.

“Maybe we just go to the Natural Bridge this morning?” I offered.

A few hours later, our bodies warmed up as we walked along the trail’s slight incline, feet crunching over a thin cover of snow. After a short hike, we seemed to shrink under the enormity of the sandstone arch overhead, standing sixty-five feet from the forest floor, cutting across the overcast sky. This formation eroded into its current form over millions of years, and it took us less than an hour to hike to it. We walked underneath, wound our way up a staircase carved to the top, then continued across, seventy-five feet to the other side.

The sun peeked out from behind the clouds just as we reached a clearing looking back at the bridge, which was dusted with snow and partially obscured by trees. The disappointment of not climbing slipped away as I considered how lucky we were to experience all parts of this place. How lucky we were to feel the sun on our faces on this cold morning. To be so in love that we were content with whatever version of the Red River Gorge we got to experience, as long as we were here together.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Chris sitting—no *kneeling*—down. He had a little ring box in his outstretched hand. *How lucky indeed.*

I can’t tell you what the Red River Gorge is like when the air is warm and Miguel’s is full of climbers. I can’t say for sure how fun it is to climb the gritty rock when the crags are pulsing with the energy of others. Please don’t ask me what the sandstone feels like; too often my hands were numb as I tried to grip it. But I can tell you what it’s like to be there with someone you love, cooking dinner together on a picnic table in a mostly empty pavilion, drinking a beer while holding hands at a local restaurant that is closing up for the winter, or eating leftover Thanksgiving pie for breakfast in the front seat of a Subaru. I can tell you what you’re missing in the offseason.

—Abbey Collins, Ferrisburgh, Vermont

Dynamic Thoughts

I’m a boulderer
of words.
I get my fingers around the T’s
Dab the i’s
un-cross my verbs
And strike across the blank—

page!
To thoughts
not yet

Reached.
I grapple
those rOund vOwels
and grOpe for purchase on unduLating
ConSonantS,
trying so hard,
to attain

the point
of …

PSSSAT!

—understanding
the meaning of it all,
the meaning
of any thing:
anything
we bother
to do
or say,
or write,
much less

boulder,
climbing anything and everything
we can.

Tiny charac-
ter-
s,
Tiny *blocs*,
somehow embody
power,
adding up
to be oh-so-much-more than the sum
of these single
pieces.

—Derek Franz, Carbondale, Colorado

THE VERTICAL JOURNEY.

Rob Pizem © Andrew Burr

C.A.M.P. was born into verticality more than 130 years ago in the heart of the Italian Alps. It is here that began and continues today the journey of a group of passionate, innovative adventurers. An extraordinary progression that has delivered safe, reliable tools and top-level results for climbers, alpinists, vertical adventurers and workers at height for more than a century.

Great results do not happen by chance. They are something that must be achieved.

C.A.M.P®
EVOLUTIONARY

www.camp.it

Grrr!!
MAILBOX WILDERNESS AREA
NO SERVICE
I'll head over here!
PEAKS
PARKIN'
Dang!
maybe up there?
Nope!
RATS!
SHEESH.
©TKnight 2024
No No No No No No No No
OH, GREAT!! Now the DAMN thing's DEAD!!
MY SOUL for A SIGNAL!!
AILBOX DERNESS AREA
PEAK'S
PARKIN'
And so... Roger's quest for four bars inadvertently resulted in the first complete traverse of the Grand Mailbox Enchainment.

Cartoon: Tami Knight

Where the Snow Falls—and Doesn't

September 30, 2024, Nepal: An urge to run comes in the form of panicked voices around me before I even see the rocks. They have only just begun to crumble above me, providing an early warning signal. My eyes dart back to the snowy trail, and I lock in on the narrow section ahead, trying to avoid looking at the near-vertical drop to my right. Unlike me, the rocks are not afraid of the fifty-meter descent into the river below. I don't understand the shouts of Nepali around me, but I hear the English word "run"—and I follow instructions.

My feet sink into snowy boot prints that were much firmer during our ascent to Tilicho Lake just a few hours before. This faster pace is too much for the melting snow. I am distinctly aware of the blood pulsing in my ears, head and stomach as my heart rate rises to match my panic. A familiar damp scent of earthy rock remnants wafts from the ground. The colors that once seemed so permanent around me now blend together, mirroring my frantic movements. Without turning around, I sense that the pebbles falling from the hillside are multiplying. The rocks hit the riverbed with a piercing crunch that echoes across the once-peaceful scree fields surrounding me.

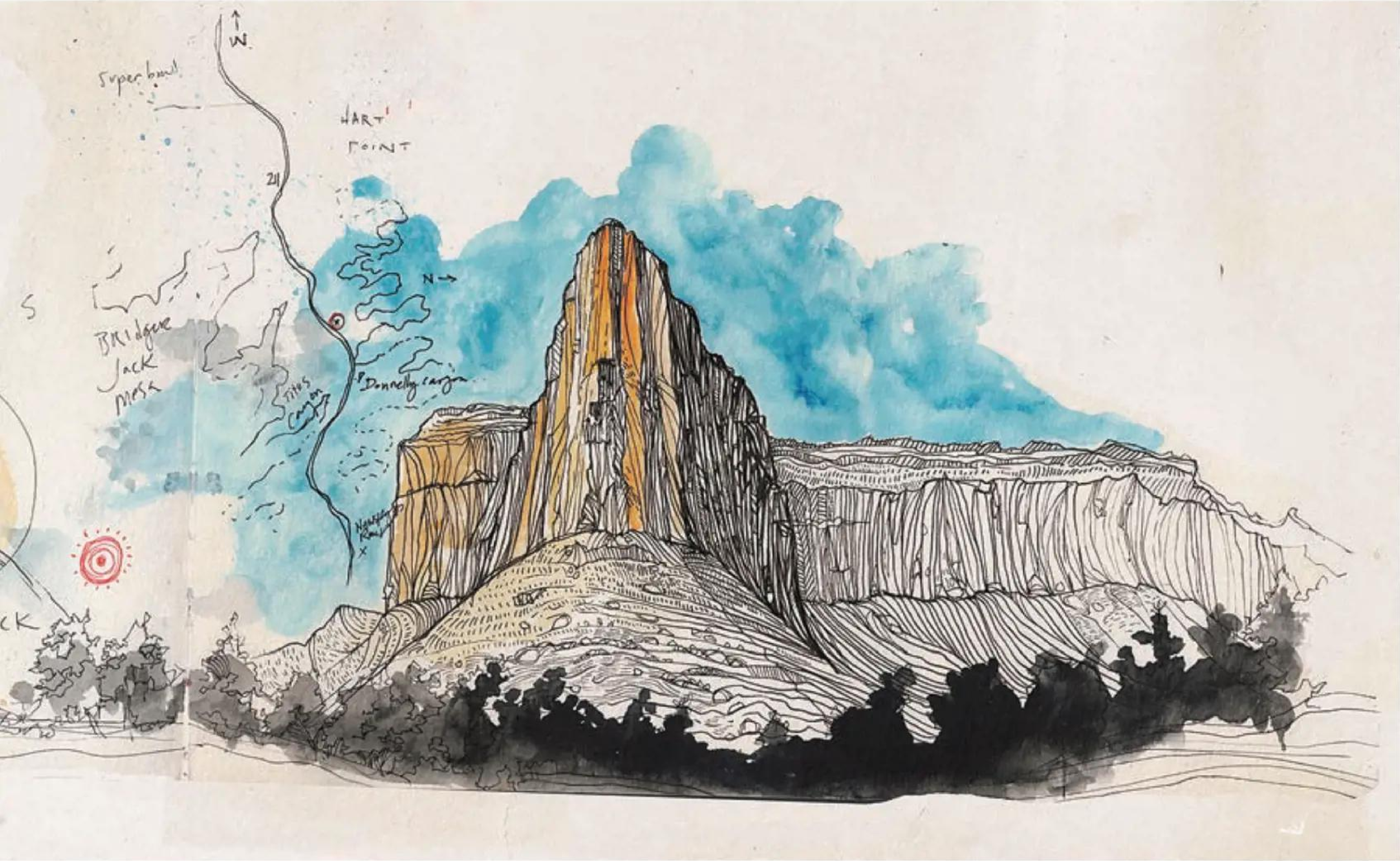
I closely follow the commands of my guide, Tila, as we make our way back to Tilicho Base Camp.

In the autumn of 2024, I landed in Kathmandu on assignment as a reporting fellow for the Pulitzer Center. I sought to understand how climate change affects people living and working in some of the highest places on the planet and embarked on a two-week trip along Nepal's popular Annapurna Circuit Trek (ACT).

In Upper Pisang, I met a teahouse owner named Narbu Chhiring Gurung, also known as Japes, who told me about increased avalanche frequency in the valley. Japes was there when a local search party found the lifeless bodies of climbers who had been buried in a slide on Annapurna II in 2019. The thinning trees they clung to had somehow survived the tragedy. In Tal, principal Shyam Krishna Panta walked me through the faded brick ruins of what was once the only school in the village. The building was the largest infrastructural casualty in a flood that destroyed much of Tal three years prior. An older couple there told me they had crawled through wet dirt on their hands and knees to escape the same flooding. With each interview along the trek, I encountered more stories like these—of lives disrupted by the increasingly relentless environment.

About five days into the trek, a late, post-monsoon storm raged through Nepal. On September 27, after hiking along the lower-elevation sections of the ACT, I woke up in a teahouse at almost 12,000 feet in Ngawal. I noticed a glassiness in the eyes of the teahouse owners as they watched their buckwheat and apple harvest for the year become buried under wet snow. We spent the next twenty-four hours snowed in. I listened to the conversations of the others in the teahouse; I couldn't understand the language, but the tones of pain in their voices were clear. So, I sat with the heartbreak that emerged within the hushed voices and tense silences. For the first time, I was experiencing the real impact of climate change on these mountains and their people.

As we waited out the storm, Tila and I watched videos of homes getting swept down rivers. The whole country was feeling the impacts of the extreme weather. It was the highest recorded rainfall in Nepal since 2002 and it eventually claimed more than 200 lives. However, while the effects of the flood still raged below, the clouds parted in the mountains just three days after the initial storm, and we had bluebird skies for the nineteen-mile and almost 5,000-foot climb to Tilicho Lake.



Ironically, I felt safer there, thousands of feet high, than I would have in the towns below that were downstream of the flooding river. It felt selfish to be above the threat that continued to seethe.

The teahouse owners, trekking guides and even ex–mountaineering guides that I met on the way to Tilicho all shared a similar sentiment: the environment was becoming more unpredictable, and safety was harder to guarantee. Word had spread along the ACT that Tilicho Lake was unreachable because of the storm, so many trekkers had forgone the lake route. Fewer trekkers staying in Tilicho Base Camp meant less business for the guesthouse owners. In the wake of the storm, Tila explained that it was becoming harder to predict how much money she can make in a season when treks are canceled or become unsafe because of the weather.

I GREW UP IN a ski town in Colorado that depends on winter. Over my past twenty-three years, I have seen the community hold its breath each winter, praying for snow. In a place in which everything revolves around the ski season, so does it inherently center around the snowfall. At home, climate change was screaming at us at all times, whether or not we explicitly speak its name. In Nepal, where people have thrived at high altitudes for over four millennia, this is understood to the extremes.

The day after leaving the teahouse in Ngawal, I sat down with Annapurna Conservation Area Project's accountant, Umakanta Sapkota, in the ACAP office in Manang—one of the last villages before Tilicho Base Camp. He candidly spoke about how difficult it can be to promote environmental advocacy while also appealing to local interests. Sapkota said that locals often don't listen to ACAP representatives when they tell them not to cut down trees that help block landslides. Residents often sell the wood from these trees to guesthouses.

"ACAP says that if conservation is done now, it will be better for future generations," Sapkota said. "Locals say if they can't survive now by making money, why should they worry about the future?"

This blunt conversation reminded me that within local communities, adaptations to climate change are complex. Even those who understand these environments the best are conflicted.

As I continued on my trek, I began to more deeply understand the widespread impacts of climate change in this part of the world. It isn't defined only by its consequences on the mountains. The storms on the highest peaks manifest as floods in the rivers miles below, and droughts simultaneously force climate refugees out of the cold desert of Upper Mustang—contradictory effects of the same cause. Nature doesn't care about those living along its course, about whether it wipes out a new climbing route or devastates a village of families who have lived there for generations.

THE SKY SLOWLY distinguishes itself from the blur of the trail as we descend past the rockfall and make it back to base camp unscathed. I let out a deep breath that I hadn't realized I had been holding in. In the last stretches of unsteady trail, I let my mind process how I had only momentarily experienced a threat that those living here face with graver impacts each warming year: *Route conditions matter, but so does the safety of the Nepali men who left the Tilicho Base Camp at 2 a.m., ahead of our hike, to begin clearing snow from the path. Those of us who participate in the mountaineering industry have a responsibility to address climate change in the mountains. But when we worry about climate change, are we thinking about the owners of the Ngawal teahouse and their crops, or are we thinking about needing different gear as the exposure on the routes we climb changes?*

It felt hypocritical to be thinking about these lost voices on the ground in the climate crisis as I was actively participating in what the mainstream media sees when they think about climate change and mountaineering. Climate change impacts routes and weather windows. But here, at the highest places on Earth, it's also changing the day-to-day lives of those along its path, and their ability to stay in their generational homes.

THE DUSTY AIR HAS settled by the time I make my way to the dining room at base camp. The familiar scent of dhal bhat instantly assures me of my new sense of safety. The clear blue sky above now seems like a taunt—a misleading mask that feels so contrary to the harrowing rockslide escape. I take my long-awaited seat at a table in the teahouse and my legs go limp from exhaustion. I watch the guides and porters around me do the same as they recount stories of the grim descent. There is a shared sentiment that this will not be the last close call. I will leave the Himalaya, but the Nepali people will continue to exist here—attempting to adapt to a changing world while carrying the burden of my carbon emissions on their fragile environment. And often, it's their voices that are lost.

—Lauren Fox, Aspen, Colorado

Artwork: Jeremy Collins

SMITH
K2
TRUCK

TRUCK

DISTINCTIVE GLOVES
DISRUPTIVE PRICES

TRUCK M3

M3 is our warmest low-profile, five-finger glove.

- **Goat skin leather**
- **Waterproof-breathable Porelle membrane**
- **100g 3M Polyfill**
- **200g Polar Fleece**
- **Velcro Closure**

Photo by Jay Beyer
Utah Backcountry

**SCAN FOR 20%
OFF FIRST ORDER**

TRUCKGLOVES.COM

A REFLECTION ON THE LIFE OF MICHAEL GARDNER

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GRAND

The world-renowned alpinist and extreme sports athlete died on October 7, 2024, while attempting to climb Jannu East (7460m) in Nepal with Sam Hennessey. Before his fall we had been working together on a profile. The piece has since become a tribute.

By Brendan Jones

IN JULY OF 2022, WHILE WAITING IN THE ONE-ROOM DEPARTURE LOUNGE AT THE SITKA AIRPORT,

I texted a buddy that I'd be climbing the Grand Teton in Wyoming over the next couple of days, at the generous invitation of one of my closest friends. A gentleman by the name of Michael Gardner would be leading our charge.

"Ha!" Dustin English fired back. "No shit. Amazing person and climber. He's one of the top alpinists in the world right now. He was practically born on the Grand."

Dustin followed this up with photos of Michael and him leading the Lebanese National Climbing Team up Denali (20,310'); Michael sipping from a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon at base camp; another of him cooking brown rice on a WhisperLite stove, his knobby, outsized hands working pliers over the dented pot.

Walking the jetway, I found an online photo of Michael in the skate park, shirtless, padless, getting crazy air in a concrete bowl with snowy mountain peaks in the background. Straddling Mt. Foraker in the Alaska Range with skis strapped to his back. One more in the Tetons, the Grand silhouetted behind him, pulling rope in a sleeveless pearl-snap denim shirt. Arc'teryx global athlete, professional freeride skier, skateboard ripper—who was this mash-up AI cowboy superhero, blessed with a lion's mane of spiky cinnamon hair?

Settling into my window seat, I took a swan dive into the rabbit hole, discovering that Michael had set speed records on Denali, completed traverses in the Tetons and first ascents in Nepal and South America. The youngest Exum guide in the company's history, he was doing laps on the Grand at age eighteen. He trained Navy SEALs and Nepali mountaineers, and led disabled veterans and blind people up Denali.

And now he'd be taking four Gen X fathers up the Grand (13,775'). Snooze.

Just before liftoff I tripped on a mention of George Gardner, Michael's father, who died on the Grand when Michael was sixteen. A shiver spread over my shoulders as I confirmed the dates: weather permitting, we'd reach high camp on July 19, fourteen years to the day after his father's fall.

For the first time since receiving Dustin's enthusiastic text, I set down my phone and looked out the window at our seaside town, tucked in the lee of the snowy mountains. The plane banked hard to the south, flying level with the spine before easing out over the Pacific Ocean, dappled with whitecaps beneath us.

The phone pinged. Dustin sneaked in one last note before we lost service: "If I was going to pick a guide, he'd be #1 on the list. No doubt."

The following day, black coffees in hand, my three high school buddies and I found our names scrawled on a dry-erase board propped up on a picnic table by the Exum Mountain Guides field office, just inside Grand Teton National Park. A lanky dude standing at one end slipped off his dark shades and gripped our hands, grinning broadly as he met each of us in turn.

"What's up, guys? We ready to climb?"

Veins ran up his calves like 12/2 Romex wire. His mullet, more autumn hay than cinnamon in the morning sun, fell lazily about his shoulders, spreading over his mouse-grey hoodie. Michael Gardner looked even more impressive in person.

We went around the circle, the four of us shyly introducing ourselves, making weak attempts at jokes. Rob said something about bringing up the rear. Michael smiled and nodded. Alex said he got held back in kindergarten for peeing on the teacher's leg. Michael matched this by saying he couldn't read until seventh grade, shocking us all with his vulnerability.

A sun-hardened Clint Eastwood blended with the easy bonhomie of Matthew McConaughey, the dude just exuded good energy and feeling. His eye contact was intimidating. His knees stuck out like two small cantaloupes from his blue shorts.

"Cool, fellas. Let's talk all things Grand, then get to climbing."

His voice vibrated with a slight adolescent buzz as he ran us through the schedule: two days of practice on the rocks across Jenny Lake before a gear check, then hike to the Lower Saddle of the Grand—about six hours, depending on our clip, with a gain of about 5,000 feet. If we made good time, he promised, we'd be able to watch the sunset and mess around before racking out early, with the aim of starting in the dark the following morning, summiting and making our descent. This last would be a long day, twelve hours at least. We'd arrive right back here where we stood, tired and hopefully triumphant.

"Should we get into it?" he said, slipping on a purple top-loading pack with twin tattered bronze daisy chains. Complete OG.

At his direction we lined up to take turns filling our water bottles from a vintage green iron hand pump before walking to the boat launch for Jenny Lake. Sun glinted off the waves as Michael bantered with the dock attendants. He had worked here in his teens, catching lines, renting canoes. The place had an East Coast camp feel, except wilder and grander. A bunch of kids had grown up in nearby cabins, he said, pointing south. Running wild in the creekbed while their parents guided. In fact, he told us, he still lived in the same cabin where his family had spent summers.

Lodgepole pines grew along the banks, waving in the breeze that had blown smoke from the recent Moose Fire in Idaho out of the valley. The boat cut through the wavelets. All of it—the sun, the mountains, the pine-scented breeze—felt almost too perfect.

When Rob asked what he had been up to lately, Michael said that he had just returned from Spain and Jordan, where he'd been working on the HBO show *The Climb*, alongside Jason Momoa. Well damn.

That afternoon, after learning to "punch aliens in the face" to make a figure-eight knot, we sat on roots in the shade, just below Hidden Falls, munching peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Offhandedly I asked Michael if he had ever tried Brazilian jujitsu. Never, he said, but he liked to skateboard and surf, and a number of his friends who did the same liked BJJ.

"One day," he promised. "All right, gentlemen. Let's get back to work."

After another sunny day getting comfortable using (and not

dropping) ATC devices for rappelling, learning to make landfall in the manner of something other than an epileptic spider, we got the green to climb.

On the morning of July 19, we gathered at the picnic tables for a gear check. I had looked at the weather—there was no version where a low-pressure system would push out this sun. Also, I couldn't fit a raincoat into my stuffed twenty-five-liter bag.

Michael listened to my inane argument against rain gear—after twenty-five years in the rainforest, I'd welcome getting wet in this hot land. His intense consideration surprised me. He told me how he loved windstorms and thunderstorms and most permutations of the weather. But we needed to satisfy the powers that be. He solved our problem by finding a packable shell.

Annoying client problem solved. Annoying problem client, solved.

Soft blue bellflowers and clusters of violet lupine swayed in the soft breeze as we parked in Lupine Meadows and killed the engine. The bright leaves of aspen and cottonwood trees that gave the wandering creek its name made a shushing sound over the gurgle. The sense of calm in the meadows contrasted with the sharp peaks above.

Michael skidded in on his dirt bike, his mullet coming to rest over his shoulders. Rob asked if he could keep his foil poop bag as a memento of our trip. Michael laughed as he unstrapped his pack, swung it onto his shoulders and started off. We all scrambled to keep pace.

As we walked, calmed by the relatively flat grade, we took turns explaining the hijinks of growing up in Philly in the '80s, the stupid things we got up to in middle and high school. He told us about Ridgway, Colorado, skateboarding with a group called the Street Ruffians. We knew that an "ollie" was a thing, and that was about the extent of our collective knowledge of skateboarding. He loved the skate park, he said, its simple requirements of shoes and a board, how it steeled you for failure with its constant tumbles. The sport, he believed, had created a foundation for his success in the mountains.

"Dude, he was a professional skier before climbing," Jeff whispered to us. "Sponsored and everything."

As the incline steepened, Michael shared with us that his father had died on the Grand. The purple bag had been his. He told us that when he was a kid, he and his family—including his sister, Megan, four years older than him—spent summers in the cabin or in a Coleman tent by the river. As he grew older he helped his father with clients, coiling rope, having breakfast on the practice rocks across Jenny Lake, demonstrating how a young kid could "cruise."

We all paused as he pointed through the trees at the Grand Teton in the distance. And there beside it, slightly shorter through the branches, Mt. Owen.

"We'll be up on top tomorrow, fellas."

After a few switchbacks, gaining 500 feet quickly, we perched on a log in the shade of some willows, each of us taking out ziplock stashes of energy bars and munching like crows on a wire. Michael said that he had eaten enough freeze-dried food for a lifetime, and that the packages dehydrate you.

We glanced between ourselves, fully aware of the expensive freeze-dried scrambled eggs and chicken teriyaki in our packs—but also thankful for the foil-wrapped pork burritos we had brought along.

"I think of it like a fire," he began, gesturing with his hands. "You start with some paper and small stuff in the morning, just getting things warmed up. Caffeine, the kindling—or maybe tea. Once you're

[Opening Spread] **Michael Gardner takes in the sunset over the Tetons from the front porch of his yurt in Kelly, Wyoming.** Drew Smith | [This Page, Left] **Gardner in the Lupine Meadows cabin where he often spent summers with his family in his early years, and which he returned to as an adult. Lupine Meadows is a common starting point for trips into Grand Teton National Park.** Eric Bissell | [This Page, Right] **Gardner and members of Team Lebanon head out of 14,000-foot camp on Denali's West Buttress. The group notched a climb of Denali as part of a broader goal to climb the Seven Summits. They reached the top, guided by Gardner and Dustin English, in June 2016.** Dustin English in motion, you get protein in there for longevity. Add another log, keep the fire humming at a nice even burn. A mix between fast-burning sugar, the kindling, and slow-burning protein, the logs."

He called this his Yule log philosophy.

I gave my contribution to the conversation, saying that hemlock is considered night wood in the Alaska rainforest. This teed up a nice joke for Rob, and Alex seamlessly transitioned to morning wood. Off in the distance a bird of prey chortled. "Shall we keep moving, boys?" Michael said.

Rob, who wore his neck gaiter around his head, aviator glasses and a cotton hood, a dead ringer for Libyan intelligence, was lagging. Michael doubled back to check in with him, careful not to move too fast, though I could see he wanted to make good time.

The sun reached its peak as we picked our way through the boulderfield in Garnet Canyon. The loose, rocky soil gave way beneath our approach shoes as we came up on a small, hard-running stream. A narrowleaf cottonwood grew along the watercourse, its leaves fluorescent green.

"Guys, it would be a shame not to drink from this spot," Michael said. We balanced on the rocks and dipped our cupped hands into the cold mountain runoff, ignoring the headaches. I suspect if Michael had said, "It would be a shame if we didn't jump off this rock into Teton Valley," we all would have been airborne.

The buttery grasses waved in unison as we broached a meadow covered in alpine forget-me-not, following Michael through the glacial outwash. Blue spruce grew along the flanks of the alpine. Farther up, plants appeared mashed into the hard-packed soil. At a small water source just before the Lower Saddle, I put in an extra lemonade electrolyte packet in preparation for the day ahead.

At high camp a couple of the guides pointed us to a fabric and steel tent with bunks. One named Scotty Palmer shouted over the wind, "Pee toward Idaho!" Indeed, the pit toilets looked west, into the setting sun. In the foreground, sloping ridgelines and swatches of green. Returning from the facilities, we could see, almost due east, the rugged contours of the Wind River Range.

We took our carne asada burritos out of the foil, nestling into a band of rocks to protect ourselves from gusts of wind that continued to blow smoke out of the valley, promising clear views the following day. I checked the time to see how long the climb had taken us. It was just after 5 p.m.

"That's Michael," Jeff said, pointing at a figure making its way through the rocks at a run, almost a sprint.

"Wow. I guess he needs more exercise than he was getting with us," Rob said, chewing.

"Or he's honoring his dead father, Rob," Jeff said.

In my eagerness to make it up the mountain and eat this burrito, I had forgotten, whereas Jeff, naturally, had not. The anniversary of George Gardner's death.

The four of us looked on as Michael shrank into the shape of a boy moving among the boulders. It wasn't until the light had faded into a purple dusk that he reappeared, picking his way down the face and settling on a rock apart from the other guides. He folded his arms over his knees and set his chin on his wrists. Scotty went over and put an arm across his shoulders. After a minute or two, when Michael didn't move, he went away, leaving Michael alone.

[Facing Page] **Gardner looks out from the summit of Teewinot Mountain while leading a trip on the Grand Traverse with Dan Corn. "One of the finest things about guiding in the Tetons is team guiding," Gardner wrote on Instagram in August 2024.** Dan Corn

Following our trip on the Grand, Michael and I would remain in touch.

On September 9, 2022, he sent an email at 8:02 a.m. that changed how I saw this evening on the mountain, along with the following day:

> *For me death and climbing have been ever-intertwined.*
>
> *The first climbing gear I ever owned was my inheritance from my late father. The same purple pack he used to put me in as a child when he would ski and climb, I now fill with his gear.*
>
> *Since his loss and countless others climbing has situated itself as a conflicting life compass.*
>
> *One place that forever motivates me is the Grand Teton. In many ways this is where it all began. As a young child I would sit swaddled in an oversized jacket around a campfire in Lupine meadows in the shadow of the Grand. And listen as larger than life characters (Rolo, Dave Carman, Alex Lowe, Chuck Pratt, Evelyn Lees, Michael Ruth, Kim Schmitz, etc.) shared their exploits on the mountain. It was the first mountain I climbed, it was the last one my father ever touched.*
>
> *As I grew as a climber and man, I returned annually to its flanks to honor my father. Often on the anniversary of his passing I would sit at the place where he landed lifeless. My eyes would drift upward wondering about his motivations to climb and why at 58 he was still compelled to free-solo alpine routes with the regularity that others reserved for coffee or afternoon strolls.*
>
> *After prolonged periods of contemplation I would head over to the Direct Durrance route (the route he fell from). One year while sitting at his spot a kernel of motivation began to form. I wanted to climb a direct line straight up from where we found him.*
>
> *Over the course of two years and two amazing partners, we did just that. We established Wooden Ships, a nod to my fathers* [sic] *favorite [Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young] song.*
>
> *For several years the contentment of climbing as a memorial to his memory lasted.*

In the morning on the Lower Saddle, we roused in the starlit dark, filling our summit packs with bars and nuts. Congregating outside, we hopped up and down in the cold, coaxing blood into our legs, stiff from the day before.

Along with Scotty, another guide named Gavin teamed up with Alex and Rob, while Michael broke off with Jeff and me. After a straightforward pitch, he directed us to an alcove in the rocks.

"Fellas, this is the part where we either split off and do the Exum—it's 5.7, you guys could handle it—or we do the Owen–Spalding—totally your call."

Neither Jeff nor I responded. He searched our eyes, smiling easily, picking up that we wanted to stick near Alex and Rob, and also just get to the summit and call it good.

"Don't worry, I can give you something extra," he said. "Spice it up. Let's get up there!"

As rays of sun broke loose over the clear Teton Valley, Michael led us along the Belly Roll, followed by the Crawl, exposed sections of the climb that made the left side of my body tingle. Michael grinned at our reactions to the sheer rock, both patient and excited as we made our way up.

One by one we crawled up the Double Chimney, Michael talking about how in winter the pitch is choked with snow and ice. After the Owen Chimney, true to his word, Michael led us to a sheer wall of granite, instructing us on where to find holds. At the top, a long dorsal fin of rock called the Horse led to the summit.

"Not yet, boys!"

Impervious to the cold wind, he took off his windbreaker and slipped on a denim pearl-snap shirt with the sleeves ripped off. In the rising sun his hair glowed as he led us to the summit, where Rob and Alex waited. We rubbed the bronze USGS benchmark and did our happy dance, each of us taking a moment to hold our phones high as we video-called our wives and children.

Following a series of rappels, and a quick snack at the Lower Saddle, we gathered the rest of our gear and made our way down the sunblasted glacial valley.

As we picked our way down, Michael seemed to loosen up, giving in to Scotty's goofy jokes. I couldn't tell if it had to do with his father, getting to the other side of July 19, or simply that we had all made it up.

He asked a series of questions about the Tongass, the rainforest where I lived, lamenting that he hadn't visited southeastern Alaska. I told him about how the American Alpine Club had awarded a grant to a couple of climbers hoping to hike the length of Baranof Island, more than 100 miles long. The pair made it four days, completing about sixty miles, before bailing. Michael laughed at this like it was the funniest thing ever. He told me about his love of Talkeetna and the Alaska Range, and his admiration of Alaskans in general. He regretted not spending more time exploring a state that was over three times the size of Texas, but the climbing season didn't allow for many breaks.

After a snack pause near Spalding Falls, I was quick off the blocks to beat Alex and take my place just behind Michael. He told me about his cabin in Victor, not unlike the cabin in Lupine Meadows, though nicer. He and his then-girlfriend, Katie, had been living there. She taught nearby. He had a degree in education from Goddard College in Vermont, not far from Sterling College, where his parents had both taught. His parents had helped establish a program sending students from the college to Nepal, for climbing and cultural immersion.

As we chatted I wondered if he didn't view the four of us, with our respective families, as variations of his own possible future—minus, obviously, the illustrious past of rock-star climber and skier and whatever else.

He said that he had taken a break from climbing after his father died, trying to reorient himself in the world. I offered that my own father had left the family when I was seven. Then I gave my best rendition of William Stafford's "A Story That Could be True," which comforted me when things got rough:

… somewhere in the world
your father is lost and needs you
but you are far away.

He can never find
how true you are, how ready.

When the great wind comes
and the robberies of the rain
you stand on the corner shivering.
The people who go by—
you wonder at their calm.

They miss the whisper that runs
any day in your mind,
“Who are you really, wanderer?”—
and the answer you have to give
no matter how dark and cold
the world around you is:
“Maybe I’m a king.”

Michael stopped walking and squared himself to me, tasting the words. “‘Maybe I’m a king,’” he repeated. Then he started on again, grinning as the thought moved through him. “That’s awesome.”

Jeff caught up, and we followed Michael to a stream five or ten feet from the trail.

“This is my knee-saver,” Michael explained. “I do this after each climb.”

“HE HAD A CERTAIN STYLE, A CERTAIN PRESENCE. IT MATTERED TO HIM HOW HE DID THINGS.”

The glacial water burned against the skin. In an eddy along the side, I went under, holding my breath—because reaching the summit of the Grand, especially in the presence of my best buddies, felt like a feat that needed the capstone of some extreme move. Also, it was a rare opportunity to impress Michael.

When we finally reached Lupine Meadows, we gathered around Jeff’s rig, changing out our shoes for flip-flops, promising one another oil massages, CBD gummies and oversized peanut butter cups. Michael kicked life into his motorcycle, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

When we met him back at the picnic table, just as he had promised, he had performed an outfit change and now rocked worn Carhartts and a brown flannel, his hair flowing out of a mesh hat, as if he had just emerged from a car garage rather than off the summit of the Grand.

After a series of emails and calls following our trip, Michael was enthusiastic about the idea of a profile revolving around him and the Grand Teton, and our trip. When I mentioned *GQ* as a possible outlet, where I had placed work before, he gave a belly laugh. While he appreciated the irony, he thought one of the climbing magazines might be a better fit.

He said he’d be glad to take a couple of minutes every few days to write down whatever he found himself thinking about. We called this his “stream of consciousness writing.”

Often without line breaks, he reflected about his father, his climbing partners and his fraught relationship with the mountains. He spoke about his burgeoning love of skijoring, the zany sport of skiing while being pulled by a horse, along with his hope to move away from guiding. We’d schedule calls where he expanded on points raised in his emails, talking while I took notes. And like this, we began to align the beads of his life onto some sort of thread we could pull taut.

Meanwhile, Jeff and Michael continued to get out together. As the two drew closer, Jeff said that Michael openly addressed the client/guide relationship, without awkwardness. In 2023 and 2024, Michael took Jeff’s daughter Iris for two day trips, in addition to taking Jeff up Mt. Moran, Symmetry Spire and Nez Perce. They FaceTimed me from the summits. I remember Michael crouched in the background in his summit shirt.

In between chats we talked about doing a trip to Little Switzerland in the Alaska Range and packrafting out. I thought it would be just the thing to kick the profile into gear, the ideal framing mechanism.

We started proposing dates. Michael talked about the epic hamburger stand at the end of the raft trip out. When Michael returned from his next trip to Nepal, we’d lock it all in.

In the meantime, I began to work on the piece. Which started, as far as I could tell, with George Gardner.

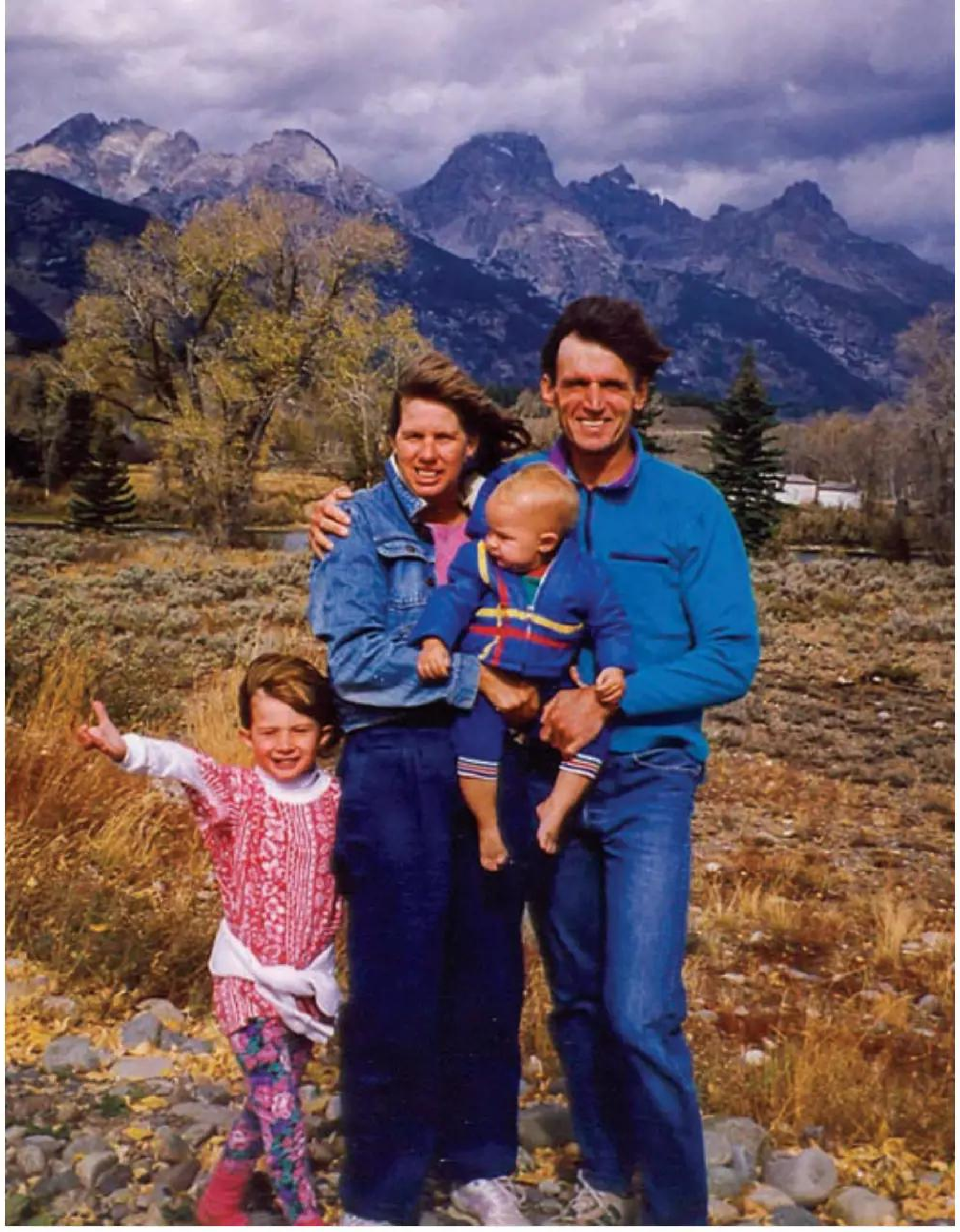
Born in 1950, George Gardner grew up in a large Irish Catholic family on the South Side of Chicago, riding his bike to nearby parks and playing sandlot games. In the summertime his family loaded up into the family car and visited his grandparents’ farm in Pennsylvania. He didn’t see the ocean until the age of eighteen.

That same year, George received a football scholarship to attend the University of Dayton, a Catholic school in Ohio. He went on to receive his master’s in education from the University of Chicago, specializing in the work of Jane Addams, an early believer in education and social reform. After graduating, he got a job at an inner-city elementary school in Chicago. It was the tail end of the ’60s, a time of civil unrest, and armed guards stood outside the steel doors.

Wanting to expand his horizons, he strapped his sleeping bag to the back of his motorcycle and pointed the wheel West, landing first in Denver, Colorado, then in Boulder, where he found work teaching.

Despite never having skied or climbed as a kid, he decided he wanted to work for Outward Bound after taking a weekend class for educators. He got the position, and became friends with instructor James “Bobo” Burwick. The two ice climbed together, hiking into the backcountry when time allowed.

In January 1986, Colleen Carroll was giving a four-hour workshop in Telluride, Colorado, on Brain Gym, a new way to increase brain performance as a result of learning through movement. George Gardner attended. Afterward, he asked to come to her office for a “balance session.” This turned into dinner.



[Top] **The Gardner family in autumn of 1992. Shortly after George guided his first trip on the Grand Teton, under the auspices of Exum Mountain Guides, Colleen, Megan and Michael visited him in Lupine Meadows. Michael was less than a year old at the time and ended up taking his first solo steps with the Tetons towering overhead.** | [Bottom] **At four years old, Gardner, right, and his friend Matt Shlim learned the fundamentals of climbing from their very own Exum guide, George.** Courtesy Colleen Gardner (both)

An unusual first date followed, "oddly romantic" in Colleen's memory. George picked her up in his old Volvo and drove to the small community of Ophir, at nearly 10,000 feet in elevation. They donned cross-country skis, and he led her out to his tepee, where he served up ramen noodles paired with red wine.

Six months later, they were married. "When it's right, it's right," Colleen said.

In 1990, Mark Udall, who would go on to become a senator from Colorado, invited George on an American expedition to Kangchenjunga, in Nepal. Though he didn't summit with Udall, George had a moving experience walking out of the mountains with the Sherpas and vowed to make a return to Nepal to climb.

In the autumn of the following year, their son Michael was born. George had been working as a climbing guide in the San Juans and encountered a client who wanted to summit the Grand Teton. George got in touch with Bobo, who was guiding with Exum, and offered to co-guide the Grand with him. After meeting a few other Exum guides, George was invited to join the team, to start in the summer of 1993.

For that first decade, the family slept mostly in a Coleman tent about fifty yards from the cabins, doing their cooking in a cabin and sharing a communal bathhouse. A group of kids coalesced. Adam Carman, the son of Dave Carman, an Exum guide, was four years older than Michael, and the same age as Megan, Michael's older sister. Michael, Matthew "Matt" Shlim and Jane Jackson were part of the "younger brigade," Adam told me, while he and Megan played cards in the cabins and swatted at the smaller kids.

"I was the resident mom, keeping things in some sort of order," Colleen said. "It was wild, and wonderful."

Adam Carman described their childhood on the so-called "Guide's Hill" as idyllic—spontaneous potlucks, boat-building, card games of Uno. (The actual "hill" was a glacial moraine by Jenny Lake, where Exum guys used to live before the National Park Service moved them out in the 1980s.)

"We'd get a directive from Colleen to pick huckleberries," Adam said. "She'd make us a huge pancake breakfast. Then we'd be off riding bikes and fishing and jumping in the creek. One year we found a snorkel. That offered a year's worth of entertainment."

By the age of seven, Michael had already shown himself to be a "kinesthetic learner," Colleen said. At three, he found the tip of a surfboard in a tide pool in Hawaii and learned to balance on it. In Lupine Meadows he'd run up the trunk of a cottonwood and do a backflip, or hang ten on the chunk of plywood suspended in the current of Cottonwood Creek from a bridge Jane's dad Renny Jackson and a friend had built.

"Michael was always the cheerleader, saying let's go do this or that," Adam said. "He had a certain style, a certain presence. It mattered to him how he *did* things."

Throughout these years, Adam remembered George as a constant presence, and a hero to the younger generation. "He could be so funny and irreverent but also respectful. He viewed a lot of things as sacred. He could do it all. He was the kind of guy who would sit down and talk like you understood."

At age eight, in the spring, Michael traveled with his family to Nepal; his parents were taking a group from Sterling College there for cultural immersion in a primarily Buddhist country, capped by an attempt of 21,227-foot Mera Peak. Having stuffed his snowboard into his duffel bag, Michael rode down the flank of the mountain at 18,000 feet as Colleen and Megan looked on, while George took the group upward on a summit bid.

The next year, following Maoist political unrest in Nepal, the family diverted to Sikkim, India, doing homestays and service work in villages and exploring valleys. When they returned to Nepal for Michael's tenth year, he received his saffron monk's robes, coming back to Ridgway cloaked, his duffel filled with Buddhist artifacts.

By that time he had learned to make spiced Nepali milk tea, knew Buddhist chants and was familiar with the sound of tattered prayer flags snapping in the wind.

Back in Colorado, Michael accompanied his father on extended backcountry ski trips in the San Juan Mountains. In fourth grade, Michael got a scholarship to the "Bump Club," informally known as "cowboys on skis," where he received instruction in the art of skiing moguls and later began to compete, joining the team in Telluride in 2004.

In the offseason, the Exum kids continued to meet in Lupine Meadows. In 2006, Jane and Michael both took jobs as dock attendants at Jenny Lake. Along with a few other workers, they rented out kayaks and canoes and tied up and loaded the shuttle boats going across the lake. When the afternoon wind whipped up and visitors couldn't paddle back to the docks, Jane and Michael towed them back in a Boston Whaler skiff.

"That was when we first really became friends," Jane remembered. "Right around fourteen."

Both kids began doing bigger climbs. Michael went into the mountains with Matt and legendary climber Bean Bowers, whom Michael met at age twelve. In one of his notes to me, he wrote:

> *My friend Matthew and I were lucky enough for Bean to guide us up Baxters Pinnacle one summer's day. Common in those years as a form of child care at Exum. I remember his brash realism and gentle laugh. For a man of such incredible strength and wit.*
>
> *Partway up the route he ventured towards a crack that from the belay looked as though it might consume the whole of my scrawny adolescent frame. Bean casually threw a fist into the crack cut his feet loose and smiling he looked down at us. "You see fellas a good fist jam is as solid as a fucking belay!" Matt and I shook visibly at the anchor. Bean laughed his raucous laugh and continued upward.*

On an unseasonably cool July morning, George Gardner started off with a group of inner-city kids to the Lower Saddle of the Grand, in preparation for a summit attempt. Following a tradition among Exum guides, after getting his group situated at high camp, George said he was going "for a walk."

As he climbed, leaving the excited chatter of the kiddos behind him, maybe he thought about the book he had left on his bedside table, *I Am That*, written by Indian shopkeeper Nisargadatta Maharaj. Michael had seen the cover page of the book, and had told his parents, excited, that the "real you is timeless, and beyond birth and death."

Or perhaps he thought about Dave Carman's cabin, beneath him in Lupine Meadows. That very same year he and Colleen had purchased it. Now they could pass the idiosyncratic plywood structure down to their children, for Michael and Megan to use with their own children.

By this time he had reached the base of the Lower Exum/Durrance Direct, a route he had done many times, including once with Renny—whose shift had just ended at 4:30 p.m. at the Jenny Lake Subdistrict office, where he worked as the supervisor. Renny was also on duty as the search and rescue coordinator, as permanent staff and a few of the more experienced seasonal rangers were assigned SAR coordinator on a rotating daily basis.

When guides saw headlamps coming back into high camp, they assumed it was George, perhaps helping a few hikers get down off the mountain. Everyone went to sleep in preparation for summit day.

At 3 a.m., the group woke to prepare. When George didn't show, one of the guides checked his sleeping bag. He wasn't there.

At 4 a.m. on July 20, Jack Turner called Renny on park dispatch to tell him George still hadn't returned. As soon as it became light, several of the guides set off to search the upper part of the mountain. A body could be seen on a ledge on the west side of the ridge.

After hearing the report, Renny went up in a helicopter with four seasonal rangers to the Lower Saddle, then they climbed to the ledge. They placed George in a body bag, and the helicopter returned with a cargo net, flying him to the rescue cache in Lupine Meadows.

"I just remember coming down that day to see Michael and Jane …" Renny said, breaking off.

Michael remembered his mother on her knees, weeping. He stepped outside their cabin, knowing his life was changed forever. He heard the sound of the helicopter blades over Jenny Lake and recalled seeing the cargo net on the longline, understanding that it held his father.

On the ground Colleen requested that George's body be transferred to a sleeping bag, placed on a gurney and laid down alongside a tall, sprawling Douglas fir tree in the creek valley, so the family could say goodbye.

Colleen recalled the greyness of George's skin as she and Michael touched him through the fabric. He had a gash on his head, signaling that he had died quickly.

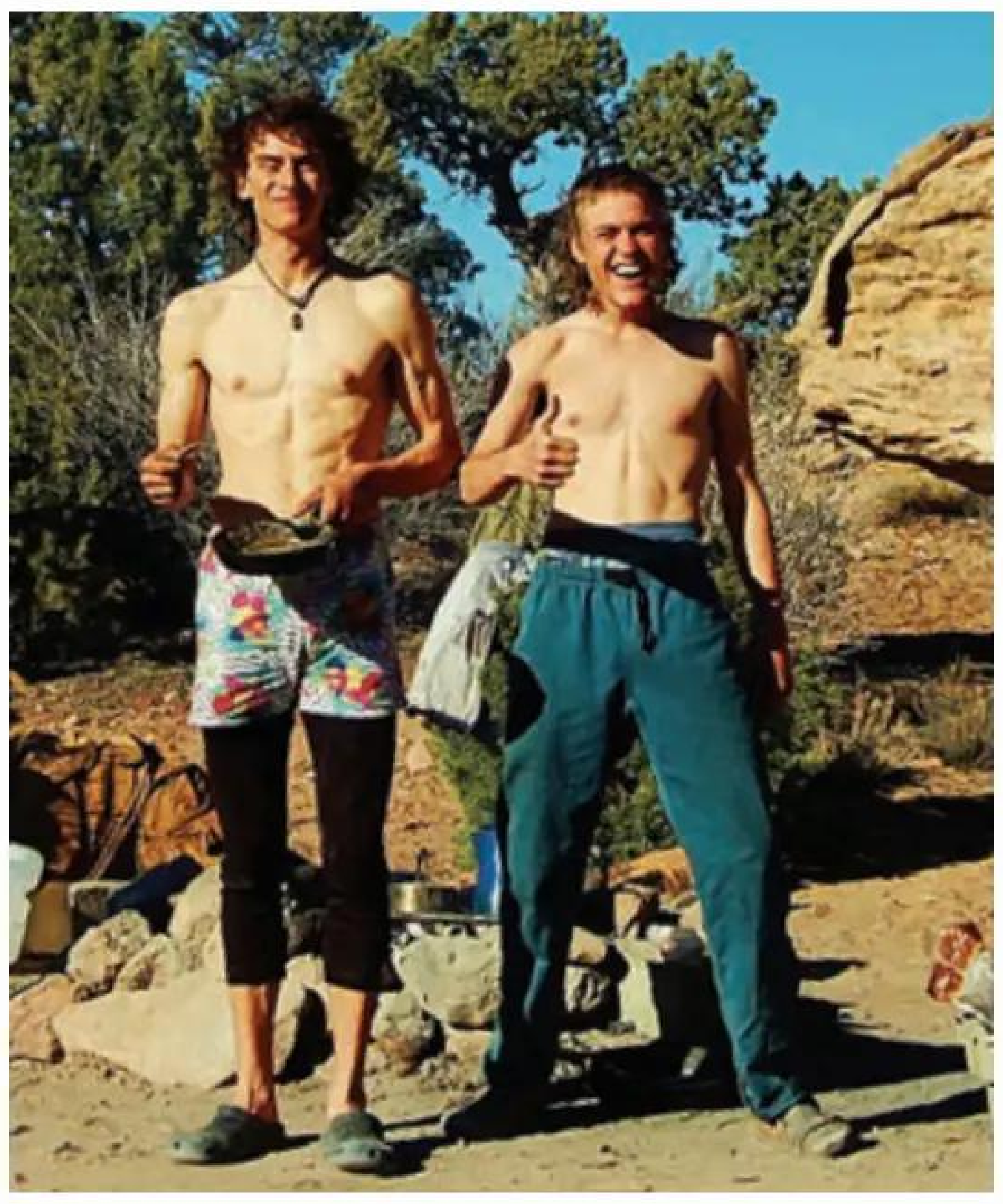
"You know what Dad would want us thinking right now," she remembered Michael saying. "Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened."

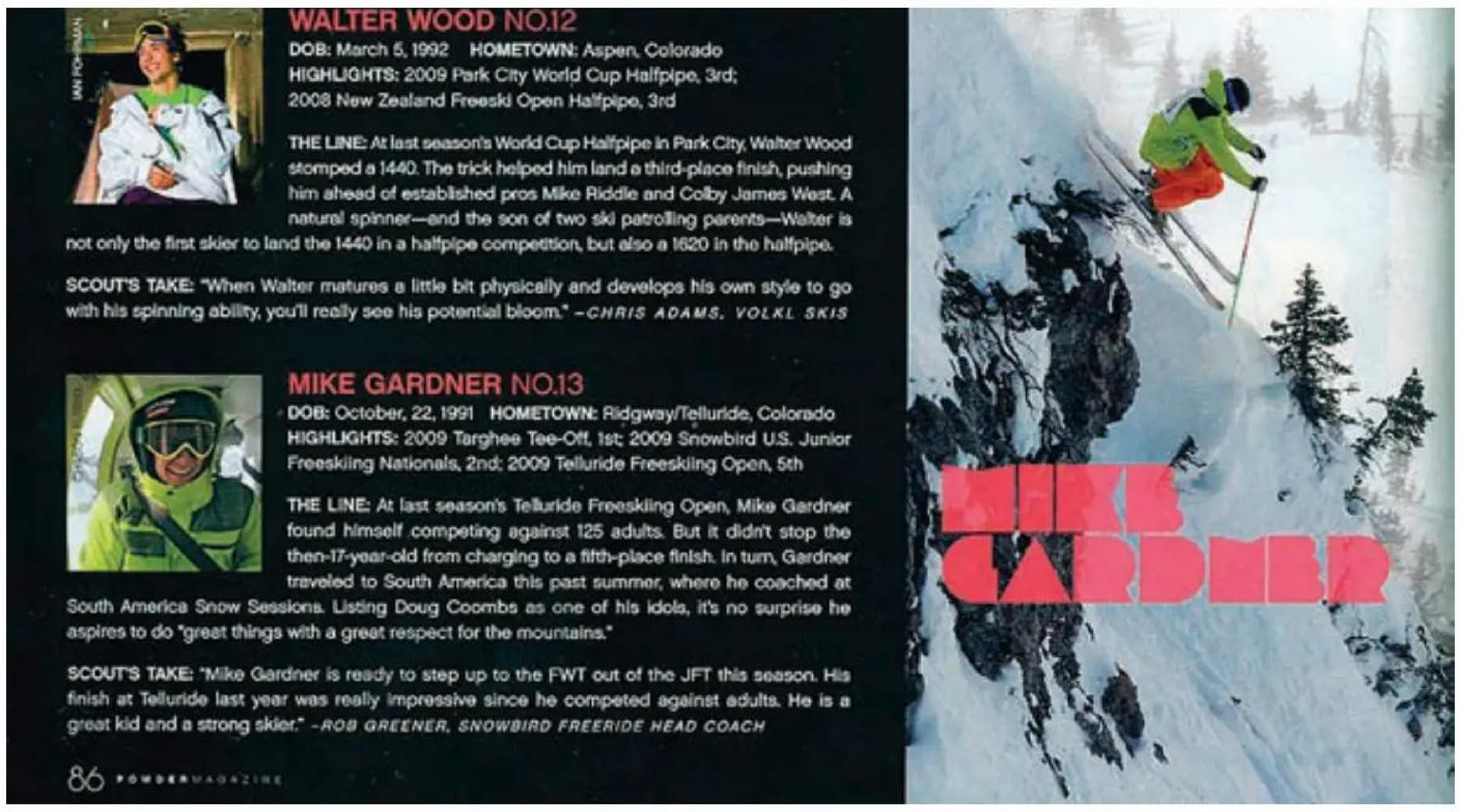
Over the course of the day, Colleen said, friends went down to the creek to pay their respects to George. Megan flew up from Colorado. The family returned to George's resting place and sat with his body. As they walked back to the cabin, Michael remarked that his father wouldn't be there for his high school graduation. Megan said that he wouldn't be there to walk her down the aisle. Then Michael said, "Dad's been preparing us for this moment his whole life."

"That was so important," Colleen said. "Like he was telling us that this is the new story we were making together."

For about a week after his father died, Adam said Michael hardly spoke a word.

[Facing Page] **George and Michael Gardner at a restaurant in Gangtok, Sikkim, India. Michael, ten years old at the time, is wearing monk's robes that were made for him under the guidance of Nwang, a Tibetan lama who had become a mentor and friend while the family visited India.** Courtesy Colleen Gardner | [This Page, Left] **Gardner, left, and Michael Hutchins finish up breakfast on a sunny day in Colorado's Paradox Valley.** Courtesy Michael Hutchins | [This Page, Right] **Gardner earned a superlative in *Powder* magazine for his skiing in 2010, when he was eighteen.** *Powder* magazine





WALTER WOOD NO.12

DOB: March 5, 1992 HOMETOWN: Aspen, Colorado

HIGHLIGHTS: 2009 Park City World Cup Halfpipe, 3rd; 2008 New Zealand Freeski Open Halfpipe, 3rd

THE LINE: At last season's World Cup Halfpipe in Park City, Walter Wood stomped a 1440. The trick helped him land a third-place finish, pushing him ahead of established pros Mike Riddle and Colby James West. A natural spinner—and the son of two ski patrolling parents—Walter is not only the first skier to land the 1440 in a halfpipe competition, but also a 1620 in the halfpipe.

SCOUT'S TAKE: "When Walter matures a little bit physically and develops his own style to go with his spinning ability, you'll really see his potential bloom." –CHRIS ADAMS, VOLKL SKIS

MIKE GARDNER NO.13

DOB: October, 22, 1991 HOMETOWN: Ridgway/Telluride, Colorado

HIGHLIGHTS: 2009 Targhee Tee-Off, 1st; 2009 Snowbird U.S. Junior Freeskiing Nationals, 2nd; 2009 Telluride Freeskiing Open, 5th

THE LINE: At last season's Telluride Freeskiing Open, Mike Gardner found himself competing against 125 adults. But it didn't stop the then-17-year-old from charging to a fifth-place finish. In turn, Gardner traveled to South America this past summer, where he coached at South America Snow Sessions. Listing Doug Coombs as one of his idols, it's no surprise he aspires to do "great things with a great respect for the mountains."

SCOUT'S TAKE: "Mike Gardner is ready to step up to the FWT out of the JFT this season. His finish at Telluride last year was really impressive since he competed against adults. He is a great kid and a strong skier." –ROB GREENER, SNOWBIRD FREERIDE HEAD COACH

86 POWDERMAGAZINE

Then one afternoon the two went walking barefoot and shirtless in Cottonwood Creek. A storm blew up, bringing marbles of hail. "It really hurt," Adam said. "I grabbed him and tried to cover him up. He was freaked out. Then he started to laugh. Both of us were screaming and laughing and letting the hail pound us."

Back in Colorado, Michael continued to ski, hitting up mogul competitions that called for two high-speed aerial maneuvers as part of each run. He took first at the Targhee Tee-Off, second at the Junior Freeskiing Nationals in Snowbird, Utah, and fifth at the Telluride Freeskiing Open, where he went up against 125 adults.

Each summer, he returned to the Tetons, converting the cabin into a sort of shrine to his father, with photos of George and quotes of his pinned to the unfinished drywall above a tin potbelly stove in the corner.

"Michael really became the keeper of that cabin once George died," Jane said. "He made it his."

Michael's skiing victories earned him a sponsorship from Mountain Hardwear. But the attention came with asks, and Michael began to shy away from the mogul competitions. He moved toward freeskiing in the backcountry and spent a month in Argentina learning about avalanches and finding the deepest powder.

Dustin English, my buddy and a friend of Michael's from Alaska Mountaineering School, said that Michael once told him that he started to get burned out on big-mountain skiing competitions after losing too many friends. A number of his friends said that he also didn't like the industry, how it insisted on pigeonholing athletes, taking and taking until there was nothing left.

In 2010, at age eighteen, Michael joined Exum as a guide, earning him the honor of becoming the youngest guide in the organization's history. That same year, *Powder* magazine named Michael one of "the 20 best skiers 18 and under."

In one of our discussions, Michael reflected on this period of transition, and the sensation of fending off the inevitable. "I didn't know whether I wanted to be in the mountains, or skiing. So I thought I might as well get a degree," he said.

He enrolled at Montana State University in Bozeman to study global relations. This despite, in his own words, having "no ambition or direction."

At twenty, he dropped out but continued to live in Bozeman, shoveling snow off roofs and digging ditches. "This was when he was just embracing being a blue-collar guy," Adam said.

By this time, Adam joked, Michael had developed into something other than "Megan's shithead little brother. He had become a very close friend."

Adam recalled a December evening, hanging out at the converted school bus Michael "Mikey" Hutchins called home in Bozeman. A bluegrass band was playing at the American Legion on Main Street. Michael wanted to go and drink all nineteen beers on tap.

After the concert the group returned to the bus. Michael read aloud from the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, musing on selfhood and the wonder of falling into sync with the earth's seasons. He woke the boys with cups of espresso to go ski the Great One, a couloir just outside of town.

"I mean, someone who can shotgun a beer and wrestle with you generally isn't going to be a guy you're having some big philosophical conversation with," Adam said. "He was irreverent and ridiculous, and then mixed that with being attentive and a good listener in a way that made people feel seen."

Throughout these years, Jane's father, Renny, remained in touch with Michael, and spoke to him about getting back into the mountains. In 2012, Michael, Renny and Jane climbed the North Ridge of the Grand Teton, resulting in the first open bivy for the two twenty-year-olds. Michael and Jane followed this up with a trip to the Cirque of the Towers in the nearby Wind River Range. Shortly afterward, Michael and Jane met up with Renny in Yosemite for a series of free climbs before doing the Triple Direct on El Capitan.

ALASKA MOUNTAINEERING SCHOOL co-founder Colby Coombs, who has a deep history in the Alaska Range, including losing two friends in an avalanche when he was twenty-five, recalled Michael's arrival in Talkeetna in 2013 to guide for AMS. "At the beginning he was just one more kid to keep an eye on," Colby admitted. "But it didn't take long to see that Michael was different."

With his preternatural confidence in the mountains, and his ease with climbing, he demonstrated that he could handle himself mentally and physically in the big country.

That first year, Colby took Michael up Denali, rare for a new guide. Over the course of the climb the two bonded over absent fathers, and a love of the mountains.

"The thoroughbreds, I worry they'll get bored. But Michael was

great, always thinking and aware of the huge responsibility that comes with Denali guiding."

Dustin, who had already been working at AMS, remembered that the more experienced guides were wary of the new guy. "But Michael's demeanor was so relaxed. He had an old soul for a younger person. It was clear even then that he was going to do big things."

In the meantime, he did the small things—like taking out the trash, raking leaves and putting clients at ease, Colby said. "That can be a rare quality for someone so accomplished—to not forget all the little things that need doing."

In 2012, Megan got married. Even though George wasn't there to walk with her, Michael wore his father's suit and glacier glasses. He and Colleen flanked her down the aisle. The following year Michael met Adam Fabrikant, who would become a close friend and climbing partner.

Although Michael was bagging any number of world-class peaks, and working for the top guide services in the country, Fabrikant remembered him as an "anti-alpinist."

"He would take bubble baths. Ride skateboards. Totally accessible. Not your traditional climber, especially for someone at that level."

By his own admission, the lack of his father's presence in Alaska contributed to Michael's feeling of freedom in the range, and across the rest of the state.

"I wasn't someone's son up there," he told me. "I was standing on my own two feet. That was powerful. *Is* powerful," he corrected.

"I think that it was in Alaska where he could really let his freak flag fly," said Katie Griffith, Michael's girlfriend from 2015 to 2022. "He was a weirdo, and that's one of the reasons he loved it up there, I think."

Michael met Katie in 2015, when he came down to Washington for an autumn climbing trip. His childhood friend Matt Shlim asked if he'd be interested in meeting the best friend of Matt's college girlfriend. Michael and Katie agreed on a bar in Winthrop, then almost missed each other because Michael stayed inside while Katie waited on the deck for forty-five minutes.

The two quickly dropped into a relationship, living in a dry cabin in Mazama, on the east slope of the North Cascade Mountains, for two years. "He hauled firewood, did arts and crafts. He loved it," Katie said.

Michael continued climbing in Alaska, expanding his trips on the shoulder season. "He said that they made him who he was," Katie said, referring to Colby and his wife, Caitlin Palmer. "He could have guided anywhere, but he stayed with them. He was such a loyal person."

Caitlin described Michael's style as bringing an awareness, even a "gentleness," into the mountains. "The next generation of climbers looked up to him," she said. "His passion, resilience and unrelenting drive were all accomplished with such grace."

Michael echoed this in our conversations. "I was brought into climbing with an older-school style and approach," he said. "That really has informed my track. I didn't go through it with formal certification."

Before and after the season in Talkeetna, Adam Carman recalled that Michael spent significant time on his couch in Anchorage. Adam would return home—both he and his wife, Allie, continue to work as public defenders for the city—and Michael would throw out some outlandish suggestion. "One time he wanted to watch all the Burt Reynolds movies in a single weekend. Another time he wanted to visit all of the pho restaurants in Anchorage."

In the spring of 2017, Katie and Michael moved to the Tetons, installing themselves in a cabin in nearby Victor, Idaho. Not long after, Colby and Caitlin invited Michael and Katie to stay at their place on Kauai, Hawaii. Colby was convinced that he would finally find a sport Michael couldn't do: surfing.

"Lo and behold, turns out he was really in tune with the ocean," Colby said, chuckling. "And he was a *really* good surfer."

Colby later learned that Michael grew up visiting Encinitas, where Michael's uncle Nick lived, and was a natural on the board. Meanwhile, George had taken up surfing at age forty-five, and did what he could to teach the boy, who was already handling waves in the green water.

Michael was also in tune with Harley-Davidson motorcycles.

[This Page, Left] **Left to right: Jane Jackson, Catherine Cullinane, Renny Jackson and Gardner pose on the summit of the Grand Teton. Michael and Jane formed a lasting friendship when they were young; they were both part of a group of kids whose parents were guides in the Tetons.** Jane Jackson | [This Page, Right] **Gardner jumars upward during a climb of the Triple Direct (5.9 C2) on El Capitan.** Renny Jackson | [Facing Page] **Silken Slot, in Montana's Hyalite Canyon, typically forms as a three-pitch, 500-foot mixed climb. But one year, above-average snowfall blanketed the ice enough for Gardner to ski the notch with minimal use of a rope.** Jason Thompson

“I WASN’T SOMEONE’S SON UP THERE,” HE TOLD ME. “I WAS STANDING ON MY OWN TWO FEET. THAT WAS POWERFUL. IS POWERFUL.”

Colby had a friend down the street in Kauai who worked on the bikes and let Michael borrow one.

"He called from Hawaii, so excited that he got to take Katie on a 1200cc Harley," Adam said. "After that he had plans to buy one."

As climbing steadily enlarged his circumference of travel and influence, Michael kept returning to Wyoming each summer.

"His roots in the Tetons were deep and could be complex," Caitlin said. "I think some people there continued to see him as a kid."

Katie agreed with this. "A number of the guides there had known him since he was little, and he was always George Gardner's son. Whereas Alaska was his own adventure."

Fabrikant, who continues to work at Exum and AMS today, said that Michael's climbing only grew more intense.

"Right around 2015, I think he accepted his path. He really started to absorb the potential of what he had."

Part of the realization of this potential came from a chance meeting with a climber by the name of Sam Hennessey.

"Michael chose Sam," Fabrikant said. "He chose Sam over everyone."

When I finally reached Sam on December 2, 2024, it was chilling to hear Michael in Sam's voice—that same upward lilt at the end of the sentence, a steady refusal to let the pitch fall, especially when articulating a challenge, or a difficult stretch.

"At the end of the day, I think our personalities were quite different," Sam said. "Michael was very much not afraid of anything. More outgoing, a bigger personality. I'm more reserved most of the time. But our philosophy on climbing and life approaches were very much the same."

Sam recalled first running into Michael in 2013, on the Ruth Glacier, home to what might be North America's deepest gorge. The two discovered that despite working for different climbing companies—Sam had signed up with Alpine Ascents International, based in Seattle—they shared a home base in Bozeman.

Over the next few years the two crossed paths in the Tetons and in Alaska. Sam heard news of Michael's 2016 climb with Jimmy Voorhis, when the two completed the fourth ascent of the Father and Sons Wall on Denali (Alaska Grade 5: 2200m) in seventy-three hours, about half of which were spent waiting out a sudden storm that blew sixty-mile-per-hour winds.

In 2017, Sam and Michael met up in Antarctica, guiding trips in the Ellsworth and Heritage Ranges for Antarctic Logistics and Expeditions. When they weren't working on Mt. Vinson, they would break off to do their own exploring. In the austral-summer months they spoke about climbing together in the Alaska Range the following spring.

The two decided that their approach to climbing would be light and fast—single-day pushes, with an emphasis on ski descents. This meant hiking with skis on their backs, and often climbing in ski boots. The twenty-four-hour Alaska light, they figured, would accommodate their spare, hard-driving style.

In 2018 they put together the second ascent of the Light Traveler route, on the south face of Denali (Alaska Grade 6: M7 WI6, 3000m). The trip took them over thirty-six hours from the 7,800-foot camp to the summit.

Despite their love of speed, Sam said the two of them shared a commitment to safety. "We both talked about it and acknowledged the risk. It played a role in our outlook and our approaches. Coming home and being there for our families was the highest priority."

In 2019, the pair returned to the spot where they first met, on the Ruth Glacier, and completed a new route (Alaska Grade 3: M6, 1000m) on the Ridge of No Return. That same year, they summited Sołt'aanh (Mt. Foraker) in Alaska via the Infinite Spur (3000m), then skied the Sultana Ridge back to Kahiltna in a single push.

"Coming down like that, we realized it was running instead of crawling," Sam said.

After pausing during the Covid pandemic, they put up a banner season in 2021. In the window between the end of April and late May, they notched a new line on Denali's Isis Face they called Anubis (Alaska Grade 6: AI5 M6, 6,900'), descending on skis via the South Buttress. Then they went up the Bibler–Klewin (Alaska Grade 6: WI6 M6 A2, 6,000') on the North Buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter) and rappelled down the route.

As a coup de grâce for the season, Adam Fabrikant joined Michael and Sam to climb the Cassin Ridge (VI 5.8 WI4, in 2021). After summiting, the trio performed the first ski descent of the Northwest Buttress of Denali, dropping 15,000 feet from summit to tundra in the space of about eight hours.

"That trip was magic," Sam recalled. "We sat at base camp for a week, then this weather window miraculously showed up. No wind, warm temperatures. It was perfect the entire time."

Michael described the trip in a story titled "Worth the Weight?" for *Alpinist* 77 (2022), writing about the wonder of freezing on the face of the Cassin in the middle of the night, then defrosting on an epic tundra walk the following day.

The very next year Sam, Michael and Rob Smith raced up the Slovak Direct (VI 5.9 X WI6 M6+, 9,000'), arguably the toughest route up Denali, setting a speed record of seventeen hours and ten minutes from 'schrund to summit.

Snowboarder Elena Hight, who would become Michael's life partner, said that Michael regarded Sam as the best alpinist alive. "The two of them brought out the best in each other. They were able to do what they did because of this symbiotic relationship, despite how different they were. Mike loved and respected Sam like a brother."

Dustin said that Sam allowed Michael to climb in the style he had aspired to since his days in Lupine Meadows. "They were like those old Yosemite climbers, bringing back the true heart of it all. It was a style of bold, dirtbag alpinist climbing, in the spirit of true adventure."

By this time, both Sam and Michael were sponsored by Arc'teryx.

The story of how Michael joined the high-end outdoor apparel company has, by now, become the stuff of lore.

Though he didn't witness the legendary moment directly, Justin Sweeny, who began managing the Arc'teryx global athlete program thirteen years ago and currently works as the senior manager of sports marketing, said that the story people like to tell is true.

As the legend goes, sometime around 2020, Michael was working as a safety guide at one of the Arc'teryx Academy photo shoots in Jackson Hole. When the Arc'teryx athlete on hand got injured, Michael stepped forward to offer his services, saying he could give the

[Left] **Gardner, Adam Fabrikant and Sam Hennessey experienced excellent conditions as they completed the first ski descent of Denali's Northwest Buttress. They skied the buttress in 2021 after climbing the Cassin Ridge.** Adam Fabrikant **|** [Right] **Gardner, flanked by Fabrikant and Hennessey, in Talkeetna at the end of their Alaska climbing season in 2021.** Chelsea Bomba

crew something to work with. He zipped on a jacket, snapped into his bindings and didn't bother to buckle his boots before hucking a monster backflip off the cliff.

"The only problem is he went twice as big as any of the photographers were expecting," Justin said, laughing. "The senior photographer, Angela Percival, came back and told me about this phenom kid, and what he did. After learning a little more about Michael and his accomplishments in the mountains, I started to realize this was an incredibly special individual."

Michael was hesitant about engaging with another sponsor, especially after his experiences in skateboarding and skiing. Also, he didn't want to be put in a box as just an alpinist, or just a skier.

"We created space for him, removing all sorts of stipulations," Justin said. "We basically created a 'Michael Gardner' contract."

Two years after signing on with the company, Michael attended a Climb Academy in Squamish, British Columbia. This is where he first encountered Elena.

Standing just over five feet in snowboard boots, with a patient smile and kind eyes, Elena had been riding professionally since 2003, competing in the 2006 and 2010 Winter Olympics. Elena said that for about a year or two after encountering Michael in Squamish, the two stayed friends. Even after they started seeing each other, dating remained "sporadic" because of their unpredictable schedules.

In 2023, Michael moved out of the cabin that had become something of a shrine to his father, with the photos and quotations hung on the unfinished drywall, and into Kelly Yurt Park, a place he had previously chided as "a retirement home for the young."

That next summer, Elena moved into the Kelly Yurt Park, where the two set up shop in the shadow of the Sleeping Indian and the Cathedral Group, about twenty miles from the cabin in Lupine Meadows. The kitchen window framed the Grand Teton.

As Michael's star continued to rise in the world of climbing, he quickly became the "muse" of the Arc'teryx brand, Justin said.

Meanwhile, Michael continued to be interested in facets of spirituality, thinking about the nature of love, wisdom and truth, and life after death. Looking on his shelf at the yurt, you'd find just as many texts on poetry and the nature of the self as on climbing: *Autobiography of a Yogi*, *Poetry of Presence*, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* and, of course, *I Am That*.

"He was always interested in that side of things, running around with his shoes off to be in contact with the ground," Sam said. "It was a big part of who he was."

As he entered his thirties, Michael began focusing on his own writing, completing two pieces for this magazine. In the summer of 2024, he struggled to describe a descent of the south face of Denali for *The Ski Journal*. (The piece was published in the February 2025 issue, titled "Turn Left Off the Summit: A Second Descent of the South Face of Denali.") To get warmed up, he wrote Elena a poem each morning for twenty days.

"His spiritual side and his poetic side—*these* were the main threads of his life," Elena said in an email. "A guiding force that helped shape his relationship with life, death and risk. I believe having this profound commitment to this other side of himself helped him find so much joy in so many different athletic pursuits. It was also why when he looked at you he looked straight into your soul; why when you had a conversation with him he truly listened, no matter if you were a gas station attendant or his close friend."

Colby echoed this sentiment in our conversations.

"His world was not just binary," Colby said. "I think Michael found a little bit of God out there on the mountains. It's where he made all his big decisions."

In September 2024, Michael left for Nepal for his fourth trip to attempt at Jannu East.

WHILE JANNU'S SUMMIT, at 7710 meters, is about 800 feet taller than Jannu East, the latter's steep, shaded flank has helped it remain one of the last unclimbed peaks in the Himalaya. With its unpredictable weather, nearly vertical ice slopes, endless rock walls, suspended glaciers and blade-thin ridges, Jannu East (7460m) is just about everything a climber could wish for, except on a massive, intimidating scale.

The "Jeast," as Michael called it, has just about everything the world's best alpinists could want in a problem.

The mountain also had a personal connection for Michael. Jannu makes up part of the Kangchenjunga massif—the same place where Michael's father climbed with Mark Udall in 1990.

"He was still chasing his father in Nepal," Adam Fabrikant said. "He was still connected. He was just drawn to where his dad had been in the mountains. It was like a north star for him."

In 2019, he attempted the eastern aspect of Jannu East with Sam and Rob Smith, but they had to bail when Rob got sick. After hunkering down in 2020 during the Covid pandemic, Michael had planned to return with Sam in 2021.

Renny recalled Michael coming to him in that year, after both Katie and Jane said they had "weird feelings" about the trip.

"I told him to follow his gut," Renny said. Sam, who forged ahead with Seth Timpano for another attempt on the mountain's east face, said that he was jealous of Michael's decision to step aside, considering that a sudden two meters of snow precluded an attempt on the Jeast that year.

In 2022, they started trying Jannu East's north face, but their shelter was shredded by falling ice. In 2023 Sam and Michael tried again, only to be weathered out.

In 2024, Sam said they arrived to snowy but climbable conditions. They were doing well, making good time, climbing to around 6700 meters, just under 22,000 feet. After two days of work, they had climbed 1600 meters up the route and were within striking distance of the summit—about 760 meters higher.

After spending a night on a near-vertical snowy wall, they woke just after 8 a.m. to prepare for a push. Michael exited the portaledge and began the usual routine of preparing to climb. Sam passed items through the opening of the shelter as Michael fastened his crampons and racked gear, perhaps adjusting his tether to the anchor in the process.

"Something happened that I didn't hear or see," Sam said. "He was just gone all of a sudden."

Snow had muffled any sound. Sam sat in the hanging tent, gear still in hand, realizing Michael wasn't with him on the face anymore. They wouldn't be climbing the Jeast. He wouldn't be continuing the push to the summit. At age thirty-two, Michael had left the world. Sam was alone.

After a moment Sam began packing a personal survival kit—clothes, a stove, sleeping bag, etc. He packed up the remaining items in an organized fashion, then began to rappel down the face.

After fifteen rappels, plus some down climbing, he intersected with a French team, led by Benjamin Védrines. "They let me switch off my brain," Sam said.

As it turned out, the French team was also retreating due to their own medical issues. After another dozen rappels, the newly formed group reached the bottom of the wall.

Despite the exposed nature of the wall base, situated beneath a network of seracs, the team searched. Sam thought he saw a body, but it turned out to be Michael's jacket. "We found a boot and some scraps of helmet. It was busted in a bunch of pieces. We didn't find anything else. We guessed that some of the remains had been covered in an avalanche, or that he had gone into a crevasse."

The group continued their descent to base camp, where they prepared to send word to the wider world that Michael was gone.

Stateside, word of Michael's death rippled through the climbing community. Because of the time difference, friends and climbing partners woke to text messages. A group began to coalesce, wanting to be on the ground in Nepal.

When Justin Sweeny heard the news, he understood that three of his athletes were directly involved: Sam, Elena and Michael. Most importantly, Sam remained in Nepal, alone and needing support.

In March 2018, Justin had been involved in the recovery attempt of climber Marc-André Leclerc on the Mendenhall Towers in Alaska, just outside the capital of Juneau.

"The difference between this and Marc," he said, "is that with Marc there was still a small potential of hope. With Michael it was clear he experienced an unsurvivable fall."

Justin asked Arc'teryx for funding, and said the company quickly green-lit the journey to Nepal, allowing him to charter a helicopter trip from Kathmandu.

With the help of Pemba Sherpa, Wongmu Sherpa and many more, Justin brought the team of eight to the village of Ghunsa, situated at 3400 meters in the valley beneath Kangchenjunga. Sam met them there. After taking two days to acclimatize, the group started the 1300-meter climb to base camp, pausing at the small summer village of Kambachen along the way to acclimatize further.

[This Page] **Elena Hight and Gardner on the Grand Teton, where they observed the anniversary of George Gardner's death in 2024.** Elena Hight | [Facing Page] **Gardner on Mera Peak, looking toward Jannu and its subsidiary summit Jannu East (left). "There is a weight that often surrounds the start of a large climb," Gardner wrote in *Alpinist* 77. "It is the moment when the reality of a dream starts to take shape. The drawn-out banter and the lengthy planning give way to the sheer vastness of adventure. There is so much at stake."** Jackson Marvell

As they drew nearer to base camp, the crew took in the colossal massif of Jannu rising up to their right, while keeping a special eye on the subsidiary peak off to one side, where Sam and Michael had last been together.

Along the way, Sam speculated about what might have happened. Maybe Michael stood on a snow mushroom. Or maybe his crampons slipped as he worked on his tether. Sam said he didn't think it was fatigue or altitude that led to Michael's fall. "It was probably just a mistake, or maybe gear failure, somehow, or a falling rock …"

At base camp, Justin said that some members of the team considered a trip to the base of the wall, just a few hours from base camp, but ultimately decided against it, given the exposure to objective hazards, and the knowledge that Michael was gone.

"It felt like we had to go there, it couldn't be just this open-ended trip that he just never came home from," Elena said. "Being able to go, to walk the path to base camp and sit underneath Jannu, gave me closure."

The trip, though difficult and last-minute, had the feeling of rightness, Jane said. "It was surreal, but natural. If I get woo-woo about it, I feel, pretty deep down, that Michael knew I was there, and was happy."

In our conversations, Colleen underlined the importance of Nepal for Michael—wearing robes at the age of ten, engaging with the practice of Buddhism, inheriting his father's own interest in terms of engagement with the world.

"I know there was a connection to his father there for him. And the fact that George transitioned on the Grand Teton makes sense, and the fact that Nepal is where Michael left us—just like the Grand was George's favorite mountain, Nepal was Michael's favorite place in the world."

I was in my own kitchen in Sitka on October 10, sitting on the stairs with a cup of coffee to recover from an intense conversation with our three daughters about leg warmers and headbands for their '80s Halloween costumes, when the phone rang. Jeff.

"I have some bad news," he began. After three decades of knowing him, I braced myself. "Michael—Michael died."

I set down the mug. The dog stared back at me. Two months ago I had seen Jeff and Michael on FaceTime from the Tetons. He couldn't be gone.

Despite the visit to Nepal, Elena said that she continues to experience that same sense of impossibility today. "I just had all the faith in them that they would come home, and part of me still thinks that."

Colleen said that when Michael died, Sam sent a text saying that they had searched for Michael's body, without success. "I knew Sam felt bad. But leaving his form there is exactly what he would have wanted. I just knew he was at peace there."

When I spoke to Sam, he was preparing to head to Antarctica to keep up his routine guiding schedule. When I asked if he had future plans to return to Jannu East, he said no. Speaking slowly, weighing his words, he said he was "currently assessing his relationship with alpine climbing."

Last July, as if in answer to so many of the questions people would be asking after his death, Michael wrote on Instagram:

> *The Grand Teton has been the homing beacon in my life since before I can remember. I took my first steps in its shadow and have been climbing it for over 20 years. This mountain has brought me so much joy and fulfillment and has also been the source of the deepest pain and anguish I have felt. As the years slip by and the calluses on my heart thicken, I find it important to return to the place my Dad left this earth. I string some fresh prayer flags, sit quietly in remembrance, honor the gifts he shared with me and then quest up the folds of "Wooden Ships" a route I put up in his honor directly up from where he landed. I used to lament the brevity of his life, but now I realize "To live till you die is to live long enough." Lao Tzu.*

Maybe.

Even though we didn't speak about it, I could sense, just being around Michael, his ease with death, the lack of fear, and his acceptance of the cycle of joy and pain that allowed him to reside in the present in a manner I have seldom witnessed.

"He had this ability to let everything else drop away, and completely focus on whatever he was doing," Elena said.

Colleen said that Michael's familiarity with death might have stemmed from her own pregnancy. He was inside her when her mother passed. "I would talk to him and tell him it was OK, but that I'm just a little sad, because my mommy died."

In an episode of the Alpinist Podcast titled "Balancing Risk and Reward," Michael discussed his relationship with death and climbing:

> *I don't have a really clear, well-thought-out answer to why I go to the mountains when there's so much hurt and tragedy there for me. Yet there's so much joy. The answer lies somewhere in the middle of these paradoxes, and recognizing that there's going to be these extremes.*

In one of our chats, Michael said that his father had endowed him with a consciousness of the importance of listening to those around him: "I learned that lesson early on—or maybe I was given the desire to have intense connections with people. And also with the environment, the landscape and the arc of my own life."

Colleen said that Michael's passion for sports created opportunities to engage with others.

"He was a great soccer player, he taught himself how to snowboard when he was four, then how to surf. But it wasn't just the sport—he liked meeting other people. And that, I think, was modeled for Michael early on by his father, and it allowed him to move with his body and connect with his heart."

About a year ago, Arc'teryx posted a video of Michael dodging powder-laden trees in Jackson Hole, skateboarding, tasting soup with Katie in their Victor cabin, the same one he had mentioned during our hike down from the Grand. In one scene, he sits on a stool by the breakfast bar, dressed in a lavender button-down. He muses on the trajectory of professional athletes, and how he envisions his own future. "If you were to look at the arc of any professional athlete ever, it's not linear. It has an arc to it, right? And we're going to, like, peak and crest and nose-dive at a certain point, and we can do so gracefully or not. And so for me to ... mix up different aspects and constantly be learning just makes that nosedive a nice, smooth, controlled arc into ... mediocracy," he said with a disarming, self-conscious laugh.

Later in the video he grows philosophical, reflecting on the difference between the act itself and the integrity and tone with which it's accomplished.

"I would hope that there is an overarching style and ethics and potential character that comes through in the activities I do, not so much just the physical feats and the pursuits. I just want to have as many cool, wild experiences as I can in this life, and I just like the experience of being alive."

The video includes footage of Michael attending a skijoring competition. The zaniness of the sport, with its cowboy craziness and ski boots warmed over barrel fires, seems a perfect fit for Michael. Except that competitors are required to do a "switcheroo"—that is, the skier must also know how to ride a horse.

"Of course Michael knew how to ride," Adam Fabrikant said, laughing. "Of course."

Just before his death, Michael had started to attend skijoring competitions across the country, showcasing his cowboy goofiness in a purple embroidered shirt, driving what Dustin described as a "soccer mom minivan to remain incognito" and winning a coveted belt buckle.

Last summer, Michael christened his way of climbing and living "Mapache style." On Instagram he defined it as

> *the style of alpine climbing in which you embody the spirit of existing on the fringe. Push into the dark forgotten corners. Sustain on what you have. Scrappy to the bitter end. Life on the fringe. Eat trash, live fast. Mapache for life.*

He posted this on July 19, on the anniversary of his father's death.

"It's the idea of latching on to something, and taking it to the maximum," Sam explained. "Of thriving in any environment regardless of what you have. Definitely something Michael was accustomed to."

But a raccoon? Why not a wolf, a mountain goat, maybe a lynx. These animals seem so much more in tune with Michael's ability to embrace whatever confronted him, as the situation called for. But the suburb-dwelling, dumpster-diving, night-wandering, green-eyed nuisance, both frightened and frightening?

It turns out the Spanish word for racoon comes from the Nahuatl Aztec word *mapachtli*, associated with wisdom, power and creation. The word itself means "the one who takes everything in its hands."

Sam said that Michael planned to get a tattoo of a *mapache* once he and Sam completed the Jeast.

I TEXT ADAM FABRIKANT to tell him I'm losing the thread. It's too much. A person is supposed to clarify the deeper you dive. But Michael? The layers just kept on coming. Despite what I had promised, a profile holding his achievements and his past and future in the light, I was having trouble delivering.

Before I get a reply, Adam Carman sends a photo of Michael on a snowy riverbank in Talkeetna in April 2024, wearing faded jeans, a camo hoodie, rocking a bushy Fu Manchu. Adam's border collie, Norma, is perched on Michael's shoulder as an ersatz parrot. Michael had decided, late the night before, to embrace the life of a pirate and to act in accordance.

Still at a loss, I get on Reddit, where a climber recalls Michael inhaling a package of hot dogs and a pound of cheese at Denali base camp. Another story of him attending an hour-long seminar in the art of holding one's breath, then nearly breaking the US world record, making it eight and a half minutes. I find a photo of him climbing Denali with a full pack, backward, leading a blind person by a rope.

The stories never end. The glare of his accomplishments distracts us from a larger truth.

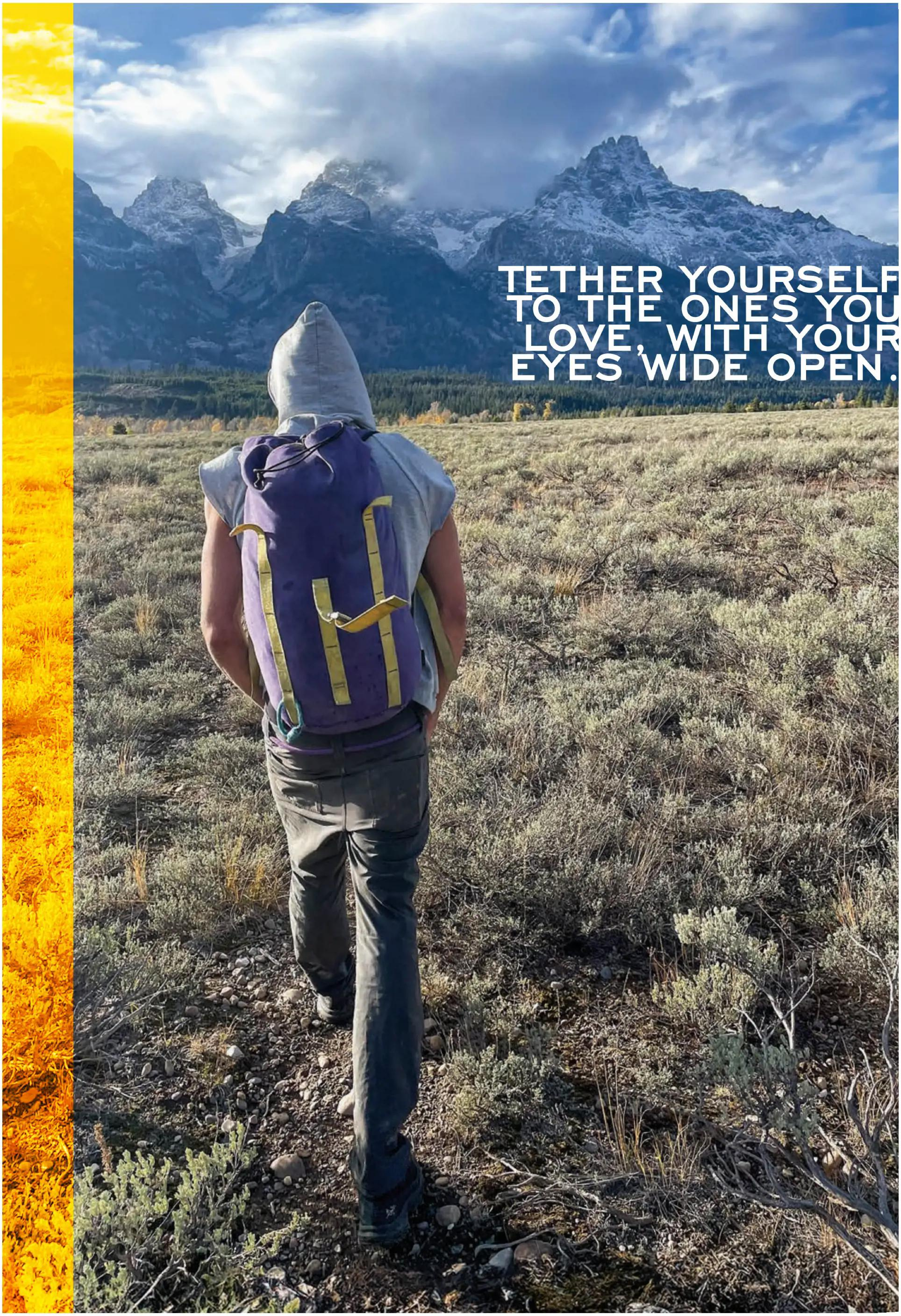
"That's what's crazy, he never even cared that much about climbing—not in the normal, obsessive, overt ways that many of us care about it," Jane said. "He just wanted to go out and be with his friends. It's such a weird irony that he ended up dying in the mountains. Because he really didn't want to."

I flip back in my notes. In September 2022 I asked him to find two words to describe climbing. Without pausing he said, "Communion and nostalgia."

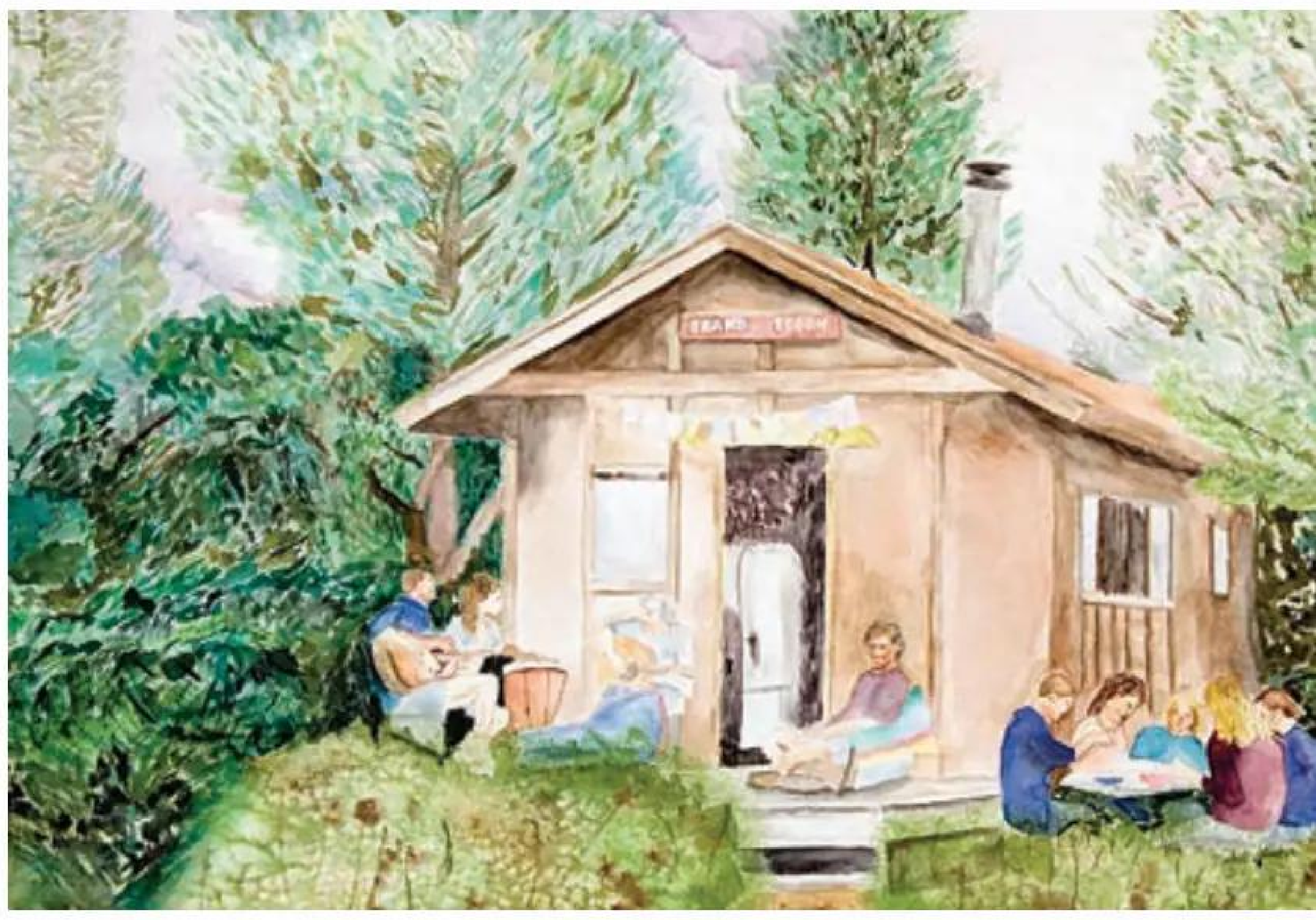
The paradox wasn't going into the mountains, as Michael seemed

[Facing Page, Top] **Gardner, determined to skateboard despite winter weather in the Tetons, found a mini ramp in a garage in Idaho. In a November 2023 Instagram post, he called skateboarding "a universal language.... Since the age of six I have rarely gone anywhere without my skateboard, no matter where I go if I find others skating, I have immediately found community."** Drew Smith | [Facing Page, Bottom] **Gardner does a backflip during the San Juan Skijoring competition in January 2023.** Kael Van Buskirk

LINE



TETHER YOURSELF
TO THE ONES YOU
LOVE, WITH YOUR
EYES WIDE OPEN.



[Facing Page] **Gardner hikes through Grand Teton National Park during an offseason trip with Sam Willits, complete with skateboarding and mischief, in October 2021.** Sam Willits **|** [This Page, Left] **Gardner shares the landscape of his youth in Lupine Meadows with the next generation, the children of his sister Megan.** **|** [This Page, Right] **A watercolor painting of the family cabin in Lupine Meadows.** Courtesy Colleen Gardner (both)

to think. Rather, it was how following in the footsteps and finding the handholds of his father led him to a place where he could move beyond the grief of his loss, and find others to move up the mountain alongside.

Which begs the impossible, awful question: How would his time on earth have been different if George Gardner hadn't died? Would his father have ushered him out of his teenage years, put a bit more tension in the line as his boy reached for the hold that had eluded him? Would a boy whose father loved him, believed in him, stood beside him, *not* have spent a lifetime dowsing a path that led, ultimately, to the same place?

At Exum for fourteen years, where his father guided. Finishing college in Vermont, where his father taught. Climbing on Kangchenjunga, where his father was a member of the 1990 American expedition. Living in the ten-by-twenty-foot cabin decorated with Buddhist quotes from his father, photos of George in the Tetons.

Connect the dots and it's not a raccoon or a pirate that resolves, but a simpler, more familiar picture: a boy in the traces of his father. Warming his ski boots over a barrel fire. Using an ice axe to self-arrest while skiing on blue ice. All the while his father's purple pack holding snacks to keep the Yule log burning.

Michael spent his last Christmas with his mother in Colorado. A week filled with laughter and long walks, going out to get a tree, Colleen recalled.

Not long after he died, Colleen discovered a note he left from that visit in the back of her rolltop desk. It was addressed to "Momma-san," telling her how much he loved her, and how much she meant to him. And on the front, a watercolor of the cabin in Lupine Meadows:

> *You raised me in some kind of beautiful cosmic country way that has given me a roadmap for navigating this world that is indispensable. Your love and energy and compassion has been such a guiding light and I feel so blessed and fortunate to call you my mother. No matter what this wild crazy world dishes out to me I have always found strength in the lessons and guidance that you and Dad bestowed on us. We are one beautiful cosmic family and you are our rock. This new year I wish you ease and grace effortlessly drifting down the road with joy.*
>
> *Smoke rings to the*
> *Sky*
> *Frost on the fresh split*
> *Fir crackles*
> *Lost lovers mingling …*
>
> *Love*
> *Mikey-O*

In the watercolor Dave Carman is playing guitar. Adam and Megan are at the picnic table, the same one Michael gripped before taking his first steps. Above the doorway is a wooden plaque with "Grand Teton" carved into it. And in the foreground, in a low-slung chair against a corner of the cabin, sitting cross-legged, George Gardner is staring into the range.

Michael was sixteen years old when his father fell. Sixteen years before his own fall.

That's the easy answer.

And yet the deeper into the rabbit hole of Michael Gardner you go, the more you realize his greatest gift wasn't getting up a rock face or catching insane air, but rather perfecting the alchemy of distilling pain and heartbreak into joy. Inside this realization lies the answer to that original question from that cramped departure lounge in Alaska. What did a person have to put on the line to live such a life?

Before that roulette ball finds home, bet your heart. Tether yourself to the ones you love, with your eyes wide open. Bet red.

It was his courage to do so, I believe, that created the aura about him that so many spoke of: the feeling that there was no other place on earth you'd rather be than here, alongside this person through the great winds and robberies of rain, the joy and pain of life.

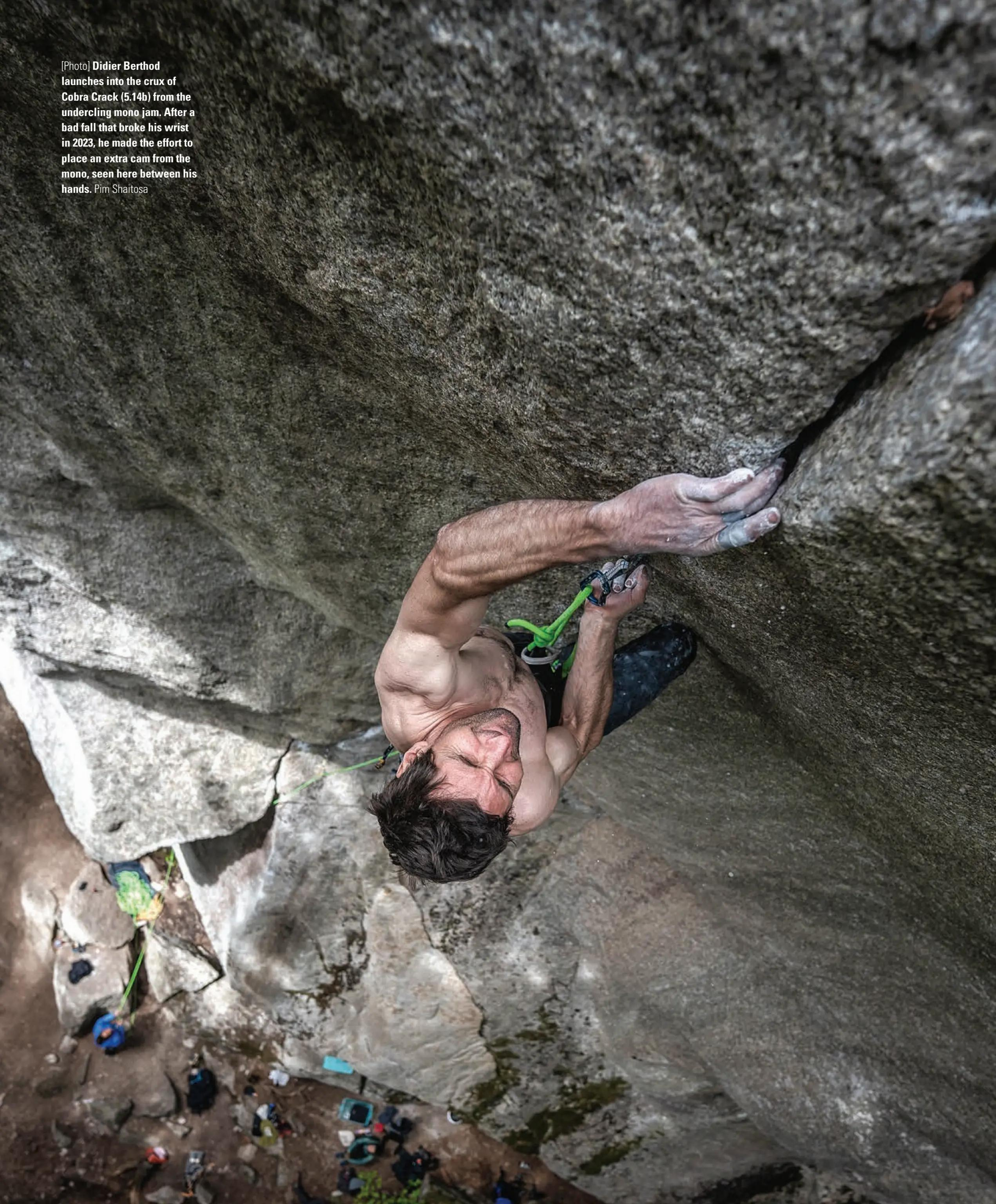
In his notebook at the yurt, Elena discovered a poem in black ink, the letters slanted, as if his hand couldn't keep up with his mind. It would have been one of the last things he wrote.

The final verses read:

Just a lil bit wild
And a whole lot of free
A little bit thoughtful
and a whole lot of speed

A lil bit Zen
A lil bit Redneck
That's all I ever wanna be

He wasn't a pirate after all.
He was a king. ▮



[Photo] **Didier Berthod launches into the crux of Cobra Crack (5.14b) from the undercling mono jam. After a bad fall that broke his wrist in 2023, he made the effort to place an extra cam from the mono, seen here between his hands.** Pim Shaitosa

When a rock climb

is connected

COBRA CRACK

by Didier Berthod

to everything

that matters

IN SQUAMISH, BRITISH COLUMBIA, THERE IS A FINGER CRACK THAT HAS COME TO DEFINE MUCH OF MY LIFE.

It threads through the middle of a smooth, undulating wall of light grey granite that overhangs close to thirty-five degrees in the upper half. If the crack were slightly narrower, human fingers wouldn't be able to fit inside the fissure, and with nary a wrinkle or an edge on the steepest part of the face, the crack exemplifies a contingency in the extreme. The wall is only about thirty-five meters high, but it has a dominating presence. Standing in the shadows below that imposing shield with the thin, curving crack is like gazing up at a hooded, venomous snake that is coiled to attack.

Climbers from all over the world have come to know the name of Cobra Crack. When I first stood below it in the winter of 2004–2005, it was merely a project. No one had ever been able to free climb the crack without hanging on a rope. Peter Croft, one of the best climbers of his generation, who knew Squamish as his home, is credited as the first person to explore the Cobra on aid in 1981. Even by the time I arrived, it remained somewhat futuristic, representing the hardest difficulty in crack climbing.

These days, a wooden board, known as "the Earlmaker," is cached near the base, decorated with the signatures of some of the best trad climbers who have come from far and wide to test themselves successfully against the Cobra. But that was still far in the future. When I first stood there at age twenty-three—after making the steep hike to find that nook behind the Stawamus Chief, engulfed by the fog of rain clouds and the dripping silence of the rock and cedar trees—I was hopeful I would be the first. I was at the peak of my abilities and felt strong and confident.

In 2003, using pre-placed gear, I'd completed the first free ascent of Greenspit (5.13d), a long roof crack overlooking Italy's Orco Valley, not too far from my home country of Switzerland. It represented a new level of difficulty in crack climbing in Europe at the time. Moreover, it was kind of a genesis for a new style of crack climbing, mixing jamming techniques with sport climbing movements.

I hadn't grown up accustomed to climbing cracks, so I wasn't predestined to excel in the discipline. I hadn't benefited from a mentor who was already adept in the style. I was a European, shaped by the French culture of sport climbing and the broader culture of bouldering. As a teenager, I competed on the plastic holds of indoor walls, coming of age in an environment where the legend was that crack climbing was painful and scary.

Cracks never failed to inspire me, though. When I started climbing, Alex Huber had just free climbed the Salathé Wall on El Capitan in Yosemite. Pictures of the amazing splitter crack on the headwall circulated in European magazines. From then on, I was willing to learn crack climbing. I fell in love with its aesthetics and was attracted to the ethic of placing my own gear for protection.

I placed my first piece of gear at sixteen in Switzerland's Grimsel area. I remember telling my little brother, Cyrille, not to forget to clean the piece when, at that very moment, it went falling down the rope onto him. Fortunately, the climb was easy and we made it safely to the top.

A year later, I had my first experience on the immaculate granite of Petit Clocher du Portalet, which was only an hour away from my home. This spire had me under its spell, and I climbed there as much as I could, painfully learning the austere rules of crack climbing. The memory of a huge whipper is imprinted on me: I was sending the crux variation of the nine-pitch route State

[This Page, Left] **Cobra Crack in Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish, British Columbia).** | [This Page, Right] **Berthod in his early twenties, during the filming of Peter Mortimer's 2006 film *First Ascent*, which documented Berthod's attempts to climb the route before his break from climbing.** Sonnie Trotter (both)

of Shock, an amazing 5.12- corner. Running out of gear while liebacking the dihedral, I made the foolish decision to run it out to the anchor in a desperate sprint, like I was used to doing on hard sport climbs. My foot slipped and I took a sixty-foot fall, ending up as the route was named—in a state of shock. But I was in love.

Eventually, at age twenty, I quit the Swiss climbing team to focus more on alpine crack climbing. Not too long after, I was hanging on the Salathé headwall, exhausted like a dying beast. Though the Salathé deeply kicked my ass, my love for cracks only grew.

During the next couple of years, cracks felt like some kind of alchemy, a love story where each partner finds their soulmate. I had discovered a medium where I could express myself almost entirely, one that combined the effort and movement of sport climbing with both the subtle art of deciphering the jams and the fear, fight and adventure of trad climbing. It provided the richest vertical experience.

In 2004, I was back in the Valley to try the Salathé again. When heavy rain came in the end of October, it was time to leave. My dear friend Simon Anthamatten took a bus with me to Moab, Utah, and we eventually made it to Indian Creek.

The place was above every expectation. Every single thing—from the desert landscape to the cracks and the people and the stars at night—was exceptional. I was on fire. Almost every day I was ticking off another 5.13 crack. I even found a short, overhanging finger crack that hadn't been climbed before. It was so beautiful, I had to try it. I spent some days figuring out the moves and trying to redpoint it. However, Simon had to return to Switzerland, and I was feeling a bit lonely. I was seriously considering giving up and leaving the Creek, until filmmaker Peter Mortimer provided the encouragement I needed.

Simon and I had met Peter a couple of weeks earlier when we arrived. He was there with a bunch of crack climbing nerds with the goal of making a movie. These climbers were awesome and I remember how warmly they welcomed us two young Swiss boys into their very VIP club of American climbers. Peter had heard about my project and wanted to film me. He had organized everything so that I could climb and he could film. That very same day, against all odds, thanks to Peter and his team, I sent the bouldery finger crack that I'd named God Bless Everybody (5.13). I'd chosen the name as a little poke at the refrain of "God Bless America," which was being bandied about with an air of superiority in those post-9/11 days of the George W. Bush administration. But when I clipped the chains, I said to the camera, "From Switzerland with love!" which Peter thought was the name, so it came to be known by both monikers. A beautiful friendship was born from this adventure, and the ascent ended up closing his film *Return 2 Sender*.

The following year, in 2005, I was in Squamish. Thanks to a friend I met in Joshua Tree after Indian Creek, I'd heard about Cobra Crack. From the description, it sounded like it was beyond my wildest dreams. I had to go see for myself.

I felt that Squamish didn't give me a very warm welcome. It rained a lot, and everything was wet.

It took me six days, if my memory serves me right, to decipher the moves of the overhanging section at the top of Cobra Crack. It was like solving a puzzle or deciphering a riddle. There were no YouTube videos at the time, no known methods, no

I never thought I would climb again. My life was shaped by the Gospel, and my consecration was total. But I misunderstood my destiny.

photos of other climbers. No names given to certain key finger jams, like the "pencil sharpener" or the "mono inverse." No method names either, like "Sonnie's method," Nico Favresse's "invert" or the "first boulder problem." Everything had to be discovered, deciphered, invented. It was exciting, and each day brought its share of challenges and satisfaction.

Once the deciphering phase was over, the redpoint attempts began, trying to climb from the ground to the top, placing all the small cams on lead. Because of the steepness and the difficulty of stopping to place gear, my strategy was to punch through the crux moves and run it out to the next stance. Falling at the crux would result in an impressive but mostly safe fall in which I never hit anything other than air.

At this stage, I was hopeful that I could send the route in a relatively short time. Two or three weeks, a month at most. I invited Peter to bring his camera, and he joined me shortly after our phone conversation.

We must have filmed about ten days of attempts over a period of three or four weeks. The rain was ever-present. But the truly exceptional beauty of this crack made me forget, forgive and excuse everything. Each day we had climbable weather, I was able to reach a new highpoint from the ground, making one more move, or half a move more. It was very promising. I really thought I was going to achieve the first free ascent of the Cobra. But I never did. After two months of dedication, I left Canada empty-handed after falling off the final crux move many times.

I could have stayed longer, but I'd already changed my plane ticket and didn't have much money left. And anyway, I was a bit fed up with the Cobra and wanted to see something else. The magic we had experienced in Indian Creek hadn't been there, even though everything seemed to predict it should've been. But it wasn't the war that was lost, just a battle.

Besides, I now had an extra reason to return to Squamish—I had fallen in love with a climber who lived there named Thomasina Pidgeon. The magnetism I felt for this woman rivaled the passion I'd previously only experienced with climbing.

In the following months, I returned to Italy and sent Greenspit while placing all the cams on lead. It was another benchmark accomplishment that gave me the confidence to return to Cobra Crack. Jonathan Hughes, who was working with Peter on the film, was there to capture the moment.

As PLANNED, JONATHAN AND I returned to the Cobra in early June 2006. I was in the midst of a very difficult time, however.

A few months earlier, my partner, the woman I'd fallen in love with, had discovered she was pregnant. She was in Australia for school and to climb, and I joined her as soon as I could. Both of us were shaken by the new reality. We were doing our best to face it together, but it was really difficult. As the realities of fatherhood approached, I felt a pressure like no other. How would I support this woman and the new baby that we were soon to welcome into the world? Previously, my motivation had been to live for climbing, not to climb for a living. But the situation made me change this philosophy. She remained in Australia with plans to meet me after she finished the semester, and in a meager attempt to bolster my career, I returned to Squamish to send the Cobra. My relationship to Cobra Crack had taken on a totally different shape now that I had fatherhood in mind. My spirit wasn't healthy, and my body reflected it.

Days after my arrival in Squamish, I awoke to a debilitating pain in my knee. It was an old soccer injury from my childhood that had steadily been getting worse. I knew that surgery was inevitable, but I'd been hopeful that

[Photo] **Berthod praying in 2018 on the day he was ordained as a priest in Switzerland. "I really thought I was going to be a monk for … my whole life," he told Wide Boyz climber Tom Randall in a 2021 interview. Berthod left the monastery, but, as he explained to Randall, he didn't lose his faith. "I'm still in love with the message of Christ. I'm still enjoying being a leader in the spirituality, leading a community, leading worship and … studying theology."** Frédéric Moix

I would send the Cobra before I went under the knife. It was not to be. Suddenly I could no longer walk without crutches.

It was painful to accept, but in a way, I felt a profound sense of relief. For the first time since learning I was going to become a father, I knew what I was supposed to do: go back to Switzerland, have the surgery and take care of myself. Reassess.

But that evening, just before going to bed, and as weird and crazy as it may sound, I lived a mystical experience. Or at least what I thought was a mystical experience.

Back in Switzerland, after the surgery, I debriefed my mystical experience with a spiritual master, a Catholic priest I had met a year earlier who had a profound impact on me. He confirmed the divine origin of the experience and gave me what I then believed to be its profound meaning: I had been called by God to be a disciple of Christ.

My spiritual master explained that the pregnancy was certainly an intervention of God. I wasn't so sure, but he seemed to be right. Jesus had multiple words going in that direction in the Gospel stories, and many holy men of the Catholic church had left women and kids for the glory of God. At some point, I chose to trust him and decided to just leave my partner, and the baby, and let God take care of them.

Despite knowing that I was going to harm Thomasina by leaving her alone to raise the child, and that I was robbing this future little baby of a humanly father, I believed that God had been planning the whole line of events. I was certain that God would take care of her, like the divine father that I believed Him to be. Also, the commune, which had been founded by my master, was ready to pay child support. I had made my choice: *I will be a disciple of Christ and will leave the world for His glory. Whatever it takes.*

Of course my partner was growing increasingly upset. And she was right to be. But I was hooked on this new "mystical" experience and under the influence of the master. Her complaints and pleas didn't change my decision. My mind was fixed.

Meanwhile, shortly after I left Squamish, a young Canadian named Sonnie Trotter completed the coveted first free ascent of Cobra Crack. I saw it as a confirmation of my choice. Furthermore, Sonnie's send had been recorded, providing Peter the footage he needed to end his movie *First Ascent*. I thought everything was in a good place, every person in their right spot. I was ready to leave the world.

I wouldn't touch a rock for over thirteen years. The Cobra quickly became a fond memory of the past. When *First Ascent* was released, I watched it once and then put it away. I felt no jealousy, no regret. Cobra Crack was part of my past life, tied to my "old self," as Christians say. As a man marked by sin, pride and illusion, I now lived according to a new identity, one marked by grace, generosity and what I thought to be truth. I occasionally rewatched *First Ascent*, but it served only as material for my lectures on the truth of Jesus Christ.

I NEVER THOUGHT I would climb again. My life was shaped by the Gospel, and my consecration was total. But I misunderstood my destiny. Through a very long process, I came to realize the theological weakness of my radical Christianity and the dark side of my master. It led me to eventually quit that community.

By the time I left the monastery in October 2019, thirteen years had passed. Thirteen years cut off from family, friends and above all, myself. I was starting a very long, hard process of reconnecting. I had left much, and many people, behind—especially my daughter and my former partner.

I began by moving back to where my family lived in Switzerland, trying to reunite with as many friends as I could. The journey was tough, but my senses told me it was the correct path.

[This Page] **Berthod and his family.** Courtesy Didier Berthod **I** [Facing Page] **Berthod on the first ascent of the Crack of Destiny (5.14b) in Squamish in 2023. He described the new route in an interview that year with Planet Mountain: "It's definitely the hardest crack I've ever climbed. But more definitely, the most beautiful!"** Frédéric Moix

For many years I'd aspired to become Godlike. Now it was time to learn how to just be a man. A real human.

I tried to make contact with my ex-partner through email. I even considered a trip to Canada to meet her, but Covid struck and borders closed. I received no response from her, and it was impossible to travel anyway.

I resumed climbing. In this process, thoughts of the Cobra resurfaced. It was my unfinished project, a first love I'd abandoned. But it wasn't the priority. There was another and more important love I had abandoned: my former partner and my daughter, although I didn't know if I even deserved to call her that, let alone meet her. But at the same time, I wanted to at least open the door to the possibility of starting a process of reconciliation with Cedar and her mother. I wanted to meet her and offer her the chance to meet her biological father.

I started thinking that the way to reconnect deeply with myself and with the climbing community would be to put my talent back into climbing. I wasn't necessarily thinking of completing Cobra Crack. I was mainly imagining that I could find some new improbable cracks to climb. To display and share some magic again. I started training hard.

Climbing gave me mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was great to play again on the vertical plane, and to be outside with friends. On the other, it wasn't all fun. My first day outside, I couldn't find a sense of natural flow like what I remembered. It was weird to barely be able to hold on to good holds when I remembered hanging on super-small crimps, feeling almost invincible. Plus, it was so painful for my fingers and toes that I couldn't climb more than three routes. But I kept going.

I was almost forty at the time, but I felt young, and the ascetic life I'd led during the past thirteen years had kept me in good shape. I felt that my body could handle training well.

Nearly every climber I met asked if I was going to try to finish the Cobra. I did my best to play it low-key and give vague, positive "ish" responses that left space for me to privately assess the question. I wasn't so sure about going back. Also, it's one thing to have the will to climb such a route. It's another to have the capacity to do it. And at the time, my capacity was very far away. My thoughts were not on the Cobra anyway, but on the little family I had abandoned.

As the pandemic subsided in 2021, everything opened up. Not only the borders but also my daughter's mother. She finally replied to my email in August, and two weeks later, I was in Squamish.

Cedar Pidgeon finally met her biological father for the first time. How it was for her, I can only imagine. It was certainly intensely emotional and awkward for me. I was standing in front of someone I had known of for fifteen years, but only as an idea. Then she was there, for real. A person I was finally facing.

Words were few, inadequate, clumsy.

While in Squamish for a week, I took the opportunity to hike up to the Cobra. It was a beautiful September day. I got lost in the forest but eventually arrived. I was alone. The atmosphere was very peaceful. I spent quite some time at the base of the wall, walking along the cliff to admire the route from different angles. I discovered a crack somewhat different from my memories. The Cobra I remembered was a wet, dark crack enclosed in a crushing and humid forest. What I saw before me was a perfectly dry crack, very light grey, amid a surprisingly open forest, where I could even see the landscape through the trees. The changed perspective intrigued me. I had forgotten how beautiful it was. The desire to put my fingers on it didn't rise in my heart. I lacked the ability, the time, the necessary equipment and even a climbing partner. Besides, I hadn't come back for *that*.

During my stay, I spoke a lot with my former partner. Unexpectedly, she welcomed me warmly and was open to dialogue. We saw each other almost every day. Again, the relationship was different. Again, my memories of the past didn't match reality. We talked a lot, debriefing, for the first time, about our shared past, and I tentatively started asking for forgiveness. When we parted ways, our hearts were full of a fresh magnetism that neither of us could have imagined. The flame, amid the cold ashes of the past, had been reignited. Filled with a mixture of desire and caution, the months that followed were of rare intensity. Life seemed to be offering me a second chance, and eventually, I decided to seize it.

I CELEBRATED MY LAST Mass in February 2022, bidding my final farewell to my Swiss parishioners. One month later, I settled in Squamish and, once again, began a new life. Cobra Crack was now in my backyard, and I'd begun to feel strong again. Just before leaving Switzerland, I'd sent a V12 boulder problem, two and a half years after my return to climbing. I likely had the fitness to try the Cobra again, but still, I didn't really know if it would make sense.

I knew Squamish almost exclusively through that one crack, and I wanted to explore the area differently. I took my time, bought the new guidebook and hiked a lot to scout lines. I thought to myself that maybe somewhere out there was another Cobra Crack. Another extraordinary route just waiting to be discovered and climbed.

I spotted a few lines that seemed major in terms of crack climbing quality, but it was a crack visible in a guidebook photo that caught my eye—a stunning splitter next to the North Star dihedral. I imagined this crack had never been climbed because it was too thin for fingers to fit inside. From a distance or from a photo, it's always difficult to accurately gauge the width of a fissure. But when I started rappelling down the airy face at the top of the Chief, I discovered a perfect finger crack. However, it was in an extremely overhanging wall, a detail completely invisible in the photo. I realized then that it wasn't the crack's size that made it challenging, it was its steepness, perhaps twenty-five or thirty degrees overhanging. My heart skipped a beat. I literally fell in love and dedicated the entire season to trying it.

The next day on this route, I met Nat Bailey. He was there to climb North Star, the dihedral that shares the same start and ending as the crack I was trying—finishing with a boulder problem through some overhangs. But his main project was Cobra Crack, and a few days later he asked if I would belay him on it. I gladly accepted. For the first time in 2022, I found myself standing below the coiled snake.

I belayed Nat through some very promising attempts. While the rope was hanging, I also took the opportunity to climb it on toprope. I was particularly curious about trying Nicolas Favresse's method, which involves a right heel hook above the head at the lip where it transitions from overhanging to vertical. Instead of climbing the crack straight on—basically campusing on finger locks while the feet pedal for purchase below—Nico's method with the high foot enables counterpressure to turn the right-hand pinky lock into a side-pull as you crank over the lip of the bulge; but it requires a difficult reach with the left hand to face holds that allow you to balance and eventually stand on the right foot.

This section was where I had fallen many times in 2005. Nico's method was much easier than the one I had tried back then. The mono move was still very difficult, but manageable. However, there was one move I couldn't do, at the beginning of the overhanging section. A big right-hand lock-off. Nat used a heel hook to help him, but I couldn't find the sweet spot to make that work. It wasn't my method back then, but it was the method I ended up trying the most. Indeed, I found myself unable to redo my old method, and this big right-hand lock-off didn't seem too bad.

I spent two more days that season belaying Nat and having fun on toprope. I finally managed to nail the first crux move, and even climbed up to the lip in one go. But I was still on toprope, and mentally I wasn't ready yet to commit seriously. My big project was, in any case, the crack next to North Star at the top of the Chief.

If I failed in 2023, on the brink of forty years old, and with the Cobra no longer being the hardest crack in the world, I would be caught red-handed in a midlife crisis.

Nat redpointed Cobra Crack in late May 2023. He estimated it took him approximately sixty attempts over a period of two and a half years; and on seven attempts he had fallen *after* pulling the inverted heel hook move!

A few weeks after his success, in June 2023, following thirty-nine days of attempts spread over two seasons, I sent my project, which I named the Crack of Destiny (5.14b). It was magical. My heart was full. Joy oozed out of me. I had confirmed the validity of my crazy bet to put my talent and creativity back into climbing.

But this success also marked the end of my trial period. It felt like the time had come for me to try Cobra Crack. It was time for little David to confront Goliath.

My first day back on it was very promising. The moves went smoothly, but I fell at the invert. I felt like my body still needed to get used to this relatively short and intense effort. However, the prospect of sending it in the near future was not only on my mind but on the minds of everyone who saw me climbing. My fitness level was quite impressive, and I found the moves quite manageable.

But I was very stressed. My heart raced before each attempt, and each morning I felt a sort of uncontrollable anxiety. I realized I was afraid of the Cobra. I started referring to my project as "the snake" and "you know who." The climb represented a dark side of my story, marked by failure and, in a sense, malice. The Cobra was an obstacle, if not a curse. While almost everything in my life had smiled upon me until I met the Cobra, every time I dedicated myself to these thirty-five meters of rock, I was met with rain, failure, injury. Confronting the route meant confronting all of that.

Adding to the weight I felt was a lurking thought: *Well, buddy, you better succeed this time, or it will be shameful. There are now about fifteen climbers who have done it. Not succeeding in 2005 was still honorable because*

[Photo] **The crag went silent in 2024 as Berthod finally stuck the moves that had evaded him for so long on Cobra Crack.** Pim Shaitosa

it was still a project. But if you go back now and don't make it, it'll be embarrassing. This thought wasn't entirely right, as everyone is free to attempt whatever climbs they want. But it wasn't entirely wrong either. If I failed in 2023, on the brink of forty years old, and with the Cobra no longer being the hardest crack in the world, I would be caught red-handed in a midlife crisis, trying to rewrite a past that was forever written. So, I spoke to few about this project. I tried to keep quiet and avoided discussing it.

There was another unexpected tension adding to the stress. Being in the monastery when the *First Ascent* film was released in 2006, I never realized its global impact. While the film portrayed me as a living legend, the reality that my partner experienced was completely different. I wasn't a legend, a hero, a star. I was the exact opposite. And my partner had to live through my abandonment all while the film was portraying me as something she knew I was not. It had been so difficult for her. She also felt like I had some kind of unhealthy need for recognition, a hunger that was reinforced by being filmed.

During our conversations that led to our reconciliation, this topic came up. I understood that *First Ascent* had hurt her and agreed with her points. When we got back together, I promised to refuse any film shoots on the Cobra, out of respect for her and loyalty to my word. Yet it wasn't easy to hold that line. So many climbers told me they were inspired by *First Ascent* and wanted me to finish the Cobra. I felt like I was going to betray them if I succeeded without being filmed. I opened up this idea to my partner and she got mad. After all, I had promised not to be filmed, and for good reasons. I overcame the temptation to call Peter.

In the meantime, I was getting closer and closer. I sensed that it was just a question of one or two more days of attempts.

In early July, my partner and daughter came along to encourage me. It was my third day of serious redpoint tries since my return to the project. The conditions were excellent—not too warm or cold or humid. I was honored to have my family along but was also stressed. It was going to be the first time my daughter saw me climb on the Cobra. A feeling suddenly crept up on me that a lot was being centered around that single crack. I couldn't fully grasp all that was happening in the moment.

A terrible, burning impatience got the better of me. I neglected my warmup, a bad habit of mine. No wonder I felt a bit rustier than usual as I left the ground. Despite the jitters, I was fresh and felt solid on the finger locks. I made good progress and soon found myself past the heel hook—I wasn't tired and everything was going perfectly! But as I shifted weight onto my right foot for the penultimate move, I sensed it could slip at any second. I managed to grab the next hold—a thin right-hand finger lock—but I couldn't find the proper grip. In a moment of semi-paralysis, I tried to readjust my foot, to no avail. The final hold was only fifty centimeters from my face. It taunted me. I stabbed for it with everything I had left …

My left hand touched that last hold, but I lacked the strength to hold on to it. I fell. I realized right away that this fall was going to be different from the others.

It was gigantic. Because of the pendulum motion created by the throw, my body started to pivot in the air. Everything happened in slow motion as I saw I was going to hit the slab below. I extended my left arm, which ended up being the first point of contact with the wall. The impact was brutal. It didn't take long to objectively self-diagnose: the shape of the wrist and the pain clearly indicated it was broken.

My 2023 climbing season ended there, with my radius broken into three pieces. There was a lot of uncertainty about how many months my rehabilitation would require, but everything seemed to indicate that I would be able to resume climbing by the end of the year. My biggest uncertainty concerned my relationship with the Cobra. This accident seemed to confirm that there was some kind of curse or bad luck between me and this crack. *What was I doing wrong? Should I persist, try again?*

Times of upheaval are certainly not conducive to making major decisions. It's wise to let things settle, take a step back and gain some distance. But I really wondered if I should simply give up. I know that every climber, every athlete—anyone who devotes themselves to surpassing their current abilities or mastering their discipline—has a thorn in their side, a splinter in their flesh; a goal they can't seem to reach, regardless of all their efforts.

Time passed. My wrist healed little by little. The season in Squamish was winding down, but I climbed a little before the rain and snow definitively put an end to it. In mid-October, I belayed my friend Jérôme St-Michel on the Cobra. I absolutely didn't have the necessary fitness to attempt it myself, but I could climb the final part, at 5.10. I walked around to reach the top and then rappelled down to the spot where I had fallen. Starting from exactly that point, I climbed the last moves on toprope.

During the winter, I progress. My wrist bothers me less and less, and I start to envision myself on future projects for the summer. As unlikely as it may sound, Squamish still has many crack climbs that have yet to be free climbed. By this time, I've identified close to five or six of them, all of which fill me with dreams. But there is still Cobra Crack. Compared to the newer projects, the Cobra excites me less. I know every detail of that crack and have already spent so much time there. The temptation to abandon it in favor of the fresh lines is strong. But there is something else deep within me. A faint whisper of the heart, saying, *Finish it. Against all odds.*

Besides, don't I have to go back there? I live in Squamish—Cobra Crack is only a forty-five-minute walk away. And I know I have the physical ability to climb it. Is it even possible to give up under these conditions? Would it not be laziness and cowardice, rather than wisdom?

It seems to me that I am driven by the community. I feel that my failure or abandonment of the goal would somehow be theirs as well. I have to go back. *If I give up, I push the whole community to give up*, I think. The decision is made: before I try the new projects, Cobra Crack will be the priority.

This new perspective feeds my mind and gives me the strength and courage not to avoid "you know who" anymore. Now, I call the Cobra by its name. And I clearly announce it as my main project for this new season. If shame is destined to have the last word, then let it.

It's mid-April, and to everyone's surprise, Cobra Crack is dry. I join forces with Andrew Worley, a local from Squamish who is also attempting it. My main goal for this first day on the Cobra for the 2024 season is to find a way to place additional protection in the headwall. Since my wrist-breaking fall, I cannot imagine risking another injury. Finding a way to make it safer is a take-it-or-leave-it condition that I have set for myself. I have a few ideas in mind, including placing another cam from the stance with the undercling mono.

During one of my days with Nat two years earlier, I made a childish bet that I could hold the stance in the mono long enough to chalk my left hand. To everyone's astonishment, I not only chalked, but also magnificently blew on my fingers to remove the excess, in the style of Ben Moon in the '90s. We all laughed. It hadn't been about performance, just play. I'd set the rules, the challenge, and unexpectedly rose to it. I realized that the mono move wasn't as difficult as it first seemed. I discovered that once well placed and jammed, it holds. And it holds quite well.

As I work the route with Andrew, it becomes clear that the mono is where I will place the extra cam on future redpoint attempts.

Placing additional protection in the headwall adds difficulty. It is like adding a move. But it brings two advantages: it reduces the runout and allows for proper one-hang attempts. Normally after a climber falls from the moves above the mono, the distance to regain the highpoint is so great that it's rare for them to finish climbing the route without a long rest and often a bit of aid to reach the spot where they fell. Now that I am able to dink in an extra cam on lead, it means that whenever I fall from the crux, I can start climbing again very quickly, thus training my endurance for an effort almost comparable to that of the send.

And already on this first day back for the season, I'm one-hanging the route with pre-placed gear! But the Cobra has taught me not to rejoice too soon.

Buoyed by this promising start, I contact Peter. We have been discussing the possibility of filming, and we're finally able to agree on a compromise: it will have to be done in a low-key manner, rather than documentary-style with multiple cameras and extensive rigging. Someone will simply be present and will film my attempts as discreetly as possible. My partner isn't enthusiastic but understands that it's important to me and the community. It's decided that my friend Pim Shaitosa will film the attempts while suspended on a static line, but that will be it. There is no commitment on my part, no pressure to deliver for an entire film crew as in 2005.

I am aware that I am embarking on a venture that may end in heavy disappointment, as it did in 2005–2006. But the commitment is low and the small risk seems worth it. It would be a shame to not be able to offer a sequel to *First Ascent*.

[Facing Page] **Berthod looks up from below the spot where he fell so many times since 2005, with success always feeling so close. He had to wait nineteen years. "When Didier came down to the ground after sending, I asked him, 'So Didi, can you tell us what just happened?' He just blurted out a laugh of disbelief, eyes fixed skyward," Pim Shaitosa recalls. In May 2024, Berthod wrote on Instagram, "I don't know if it's a chapter closing or a chapter opening. But what is certain is that what I experienced yesterday will mark a major turning point in the course of my existence."** Pim Shaitosa

[Photo] **Smoking his "umpteenth cigarette," Berthod adds his name to the Earlmaker, a hangboard with a list of climbers who have sent the fabled route. His was the twentieth name on the board.** Rachel Ross

Sure enough, the familiar angst returns during my next day out. It feels uncontrollable, like I am the antithesis of Alex Honnold and can't face life's big moment. Still, I manage to climb well enough and end the day with three one-hang attempts, falling at the heel hook, but at the cost of three bloody gobies on my fingers.

A WEEK LATER, I'M hiking up to the climb alone to meet friends who are already up there. As I walk through the forest, I feel like a modern Sisyphus, condemned to climb Cobra Crack every day without ever moving on. I feel a wave of shame and humiliation at this thought. But I let it pass through me, not resisting. I've accepted that this could be my fate. *We are all Sisyphus*, I think. *The only difference is that I am a visible and recognized Sisyphus, while others either ignore it or try to disguise it.*

As soon as I start my warmup climb, I reopen two gobies from the previous week. I bleed profusely and wonder what I am doing up here.

Ten days later, I'm in my van drinking coffee, preparing for another day of climbing. My fingers are healed, and the Cobra is in good condition. I feel the usual stress, but this time I take a moment to analyze it. *Where does it come from? What is its root cause?* In meditating, I realize that there is impatience in my mind. A kind of false hope that makes me believe that today will be that long-awaited, -desired, -hoped-for day. I realize that since last year, and surely since the very beginning, my subconscious has conveyed this feeling every time I climb on the route. Every day I am under pressure because, unconsciously, I think I am going to achieve success; that it's just a matter of time, and my life will be transformed on this day. I put these thoughts into writing to help correct this mindset:

This day will not be different from the others.... It will simply be a day of life, of fraternity, of being happy, of just being there. Trying this magnificent splitter and being with these amazing people. That's what's important. I need to imprint this in my mind, in my flesh, in my nerves.

And it works. I am liberated. I am more open, much less stressed, more attentive to others and to myself. I am happy to be here and to walk these forty-five minutes in the forest. I appreciate every moment and every person. I take time to do a decent warmup on the first half of the route to the beginning of the difficulties. I feel pretty good. But most importantly, I feel free and happy to be here.

A short while later, I launch into my first attempt of the day. Amity Warme belays me, and I leave the ground after our usual fist bump. Pim is hanging on her rope, silently filming.

Everything goes perfectly until the mono. There, for the first time in a long time, I fail to place it correctly, and I feel myself starting to fall backward. But I fight to stay on, and I manage at the last moment to reload the mono and arm it properly. Until then, I'd never been able to reload the mono when it was poorly positioned. With the mono engaged, and protection placed, I reach the finger lock at the lip ... and sense that I feel fresh enough to send!

Right then, out of nowhere, I force myself to switch off my brain. I know that I might mess everything up if I start letting my mind wander. I block any form of reflection, analysis or dialogue with myself. The sole thing that matters at this moment is to climb, to execute robotically and impassively, without emotions, impatience or anticipation of anything.

With my thoughts turned off, I focus a hundred percent and stick the last technical movements—left hand to the edges on the face, then right hand up higher in the thin crack, then

The struggles of life are a gift—they make us who we are.
It is how we respond to them that defines us.

the left hand again, where I place the first bit of gear after the lip. In this state of extreme concentration, I don't climb well, not well at all. *Not falling here* is the only consideration.

I advance two more meters to where it is possible to almost let go with both hands. That's when my joy bursts out, and I release the pressure. Certainly, there are still the last ten meters of 5.10 to climb, but I've rehearsed that section two or three times this year, and unless something improbable happens, it will work. Especially since I can rest well on this small ledge before starting the easier section. Five minutes later, an ultra-focused Didier, climbing like a penguin (that is, very poorly), finds himself at the top of Cobra Crack.

Nineteen years after coming so close to success; four and a half years after resuming climbing; one year after fracturing my wrist; on the fourth day of the 2024 season; and on the day when I had convinced myself that it would not be the long-awaited D-Day—I've ascended without falling.

I would have liked to untie, drop the rope into the void and join my companions at the base by walking down a small path that skirts the cliff. The symbolism would have been strong, as I've been bound to this route for so long. But my friend and belayer, Amity, is also trying the route, and the gear needs to be removed to allow her to make an attempt. So I descend on toprope, cleaning the gear along the way. *How fitting*, I think, *to end my relationship with the Cobra by preparing it for someone else.*

My close friends know that I enjoy smoking a cigarette from time to time, especially after a send. I don't smoke often, being fully aware of the harmful effects of tobacco. Earlier in the year, I'd forbidden myself to smoke until success was achieved. I told myself that I would run at least once a week and not touch a cigarette. But that morning, when I realized that my main obstacle was not the capacity of my lungs to store oxygen, but rather my obsession with victory, I'd slipped my cigarettes and lighter into my bag. It was merely one more way to absolve myself from focusing on the desired outcome.

As it turns out, it is indeed a victory cigarette after all. And the excitement is such that I smoke at least three or four in a row.

Even though my bag includes a pack of cigarettes, it does not hold a pen. Normally a pen would not be a consequential thing to have at the crag. Yet it is time to fetch the Earlmaker from the small undercut at the base of the route. This wooden board is about fifty centimeters long and has two holes big enough to fit one or two fingers. Tom Randall and Pete Whittaker, who are now famously known as the "Wide Boyz," created this portable hangboard to use for warming up in 2013, when both of them managed to send the Cobra in just three weeks. They jokingly named the board after one of their memorable training days where they did dead hangs on random gritstone holds at the base of England's Earl Crag. They decided to leave it here, after marking the names of climbers who'd sent in chronological order. Tom and Pete finished the list after Alex Honnold, Will Stanhope, Yuji Hirayama, Matt Segal, Ethan Pringle, Nicolas Favresse and, of course, Sonnie Trotter. Since then, the list has grown by about ten more climbers, and this little beam has established its home up here as a quasi-sacred historical artifact for the small community of crack lovers. But no one has a pen for me to sign it!

A friend of Amity's is about to leave the Chief parking lot to join us, and she just has time to text him to bring a pen with him. Without connecting it to the Earlmaker, he complies.

An hour later, smoking my umpteenth cigarette, feeling somewhat intimidated by the camera aimed at me, I am writing my name. I only write my first name, granting myself the little pretension that anyone even remotely interested in Cobra Crack and the Earlmaker will understand which Didier I am. In parentheses, I add, "Finally ;-)."

I thus become the twentieth ascensionist, or at least the twentieth name on the board. My name could very well have appeared at the very beginning, or at least toward the beginning of the list, on the left side of the Earlmaker. But there it is on the right, temporarily closing the roll call.

I've come to realize that the overall human experience is even better. Even stronger. Thanks to these obstacles, victory tastes even sweeter. I can experience it like no one else. The words of the French playwright Pierre Corneille have never resonated so greatly: "To conquer without risk is to triumph without glory."

As I WRITE THIS, eight months have passed. As anticipated, the community vibrated with the news and I received many messages of congratulations. The reactions touched me and still touch me immensely. I am deeply grateful. I also feel that a whole part of my identity is taking a more positive direction, although I am still adjusting to this new reality.

Cobra Crack challenged me to look at myself in an honest way, and to see things differently. The struggles of life are a gift—they make us who we are. It is how we respond to them that defines us.

My partner and my daughter still challenge me a lot. But I'm so thankful because, without them, I would not be who I am today. More honest and vulnerable. Doing my best to face my fears with courage, peace and patience. Trying simply to be a human, by loving and accepting being loved.

Life itself is a contingency in the extreme. Something that easily might never have existed at all. ■

[Photo] **Mary Catherine Eden flows through Necronomicon (5.14a) in Canyonlands National Park, Utah.** Chris Uy

From Kentucky to Canyonlands

A story of unlikely routes

by Mary Catherine Eden

Imagine a 164-foot horizontal roof crack that is only big enough to slot your fingers inside in a few places, and wide enough to fit your upside-down body by the end.

Now picture this giant roof underground—a straight line through the ceiling of a cave beneath the White Rim caprock in Canyonlands National Park, Utah. This is the route that has become famously known as Black Mamba (5.14b).

In October 2023, my friends and I obtained a permit and drove for two and a half hours on the long, rough four-wheel-drive White Rim Road. We had enough camping supplies to stay for two weeks, with occasional trips to resupply. After parking the car, we hiked down to our campsite below the rim of Wingate Sandstone with all our gear and supplies. Even though Black Mamba resides underground, on the underside of the caprock, the White Rim itself overlooks the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers far below. Miles of crimson desert cliffs, buttes, towers and hoodoos fan out in all directions, above and below the rim.

Waking up slowly on November 7, with the sun hitting my tent in our little camp nestled among mushroom-topped sandstone hallways, towers and caves, I crawl out to greet the day. I go through the usual motions of making coffee and force myself to eat breakfast. After pouring my cup of coffee in my favorite aluminum coffee mug with a piton for a handle, I scramble up from camp to sit on the rim and stretch my sore muscles. I contemplate the ache in my neck as I stare out across the expanse, where I can barely see a hint of the world-renowned crack climbing destination of Indian Creek in the distance to the south. The sunrises and sunsets out here make me feel as if I'm on another planet; I've never climbed anywhere as beautiful. I'm no poet, but the White Rim always makes me wish I were.

Our camp is just outside of the darkest cave, the one that houses my project, and almost too soon it will be time to scramble back into the shadowy crevice and tape up my fingers. Suddenly, a herd of bighorn sheep run by along the rim. They seem playful, as if they have come to say hello, and it gives me a feeling that today will be special. Returning to camp, I sit in my chair and run through the route in my mind, trying to visualize the cruxes while taping my sweaty fingers …

Black Mamba begins as a boulder problem in the depths of a natural tunnel, where I feel like I could encounter one of the underground monsters from the 1990 movie *Tremors*. The opening moves are friendly hand jams covered in spiderwebs. It is so close to the ground that you start in a crouched position. By the time you reach the daylight near the mouth of the cave, you have traveled 130 feet. There, the crack widens and the ground drops away, requiring large cams, a rope and a belay to protect the last thirty-five feet of inverted full-body thrutching in the offwidth to the lip of the roof, where a final crux guards the topout. When you emerge onto the rim, *you* feel like a Graboid monster that has been kicked by a donkey.

"What happened to you that made you so stoked to live in this dark, creepy cave full of spiders and climb a sandy roof crack?" my friend Spencer McKay quips over his morning caffeine.

"I dunno, man," I say with a laugh. "It's just the best, don't you think?"

In many ways, desert crack climbing seems like the antithesis of the life I once imagined for myself as a kid in Kentucky: a life in a cozy home with a horse and a dog, surrounded by thick forests, where the trees are so dense you can't see the next hill through the green foliage in the warmer months. Maybe I would have discovered climbing in that life too, but it likely would have been on the sport climbs in the Red River Gorge, which is composed of a very different type of sandstone. Instead, I discovered climbing in Utah, on these perfect fissures that slice through orange cliffs up into bluebird skies, as though they were made with the intention and beauty of a master craftsman.

As unlikely as my introduction to them might have been, the desert and its cracks suited me. I didn't need super-strong tendons, groomed from childhood in a climbing gym under the watchful eye of a coach. Crack climbing seemed straightforward by comparison, mostly boiling down to: How much pain can you tolerate? How hard can you work? Are you willing to learn? Those were the things I could do. Plus, I loved escaping into the silence of the desert.

I GREW UP IN KENTUCKY, where my family was land rich and money poor. We struggled to pay the electric bill, but I had more freedom than anyone else I knew. I ran wild, exploring creeks, digging holes for buried treasure, getting spooked in caves, and once I even accidentally ate fermented blackberries that left me a little tipsy. I remember falling asleep one day in a spot of warm sun on a dirt road, tired from running around in an overgrown field. I'd only meant to close my eyes for a moment, but I felt so dreamy there. Happy. Light. Content. Then a loud rumbling noise jolted me awake—my dad driving a tractor down the road—and I darted into the bushes before he saw me, intent on continuing my aimless, carefree nonsense.

The land wasn't worth much to anyone else, but it had been passed down from my grandmother to my father, and my parents did their best to farm it. I didn't know much back then, other than how much I loved my dad carrying me out of church when I pretended to be asleep after the sermon. I knew how comforting my mom's favorite perfume was; that I could never get enough of my sister deigning to play Barbies with me; that I hated wearing shoes or pants; and that if I was sneaky, I could climb the ladder my dad left leaning against the house and run around on the roof.

Then one day, when I was five, I heard the phone ring and pestered my mom to answer it. I knew that call was bad news the moment my mom picked up.

My dad didn't come home again for a year. He had been squished like the Wicked Witch of the East while looking for a water leak under someone's single-wide trailer. The paramedics and doctors tried to put him back together again, like Humpty-Dumpty. He wasn't expected to live. Doctors said he would die, and that if he survived, he'd be a vegetable.

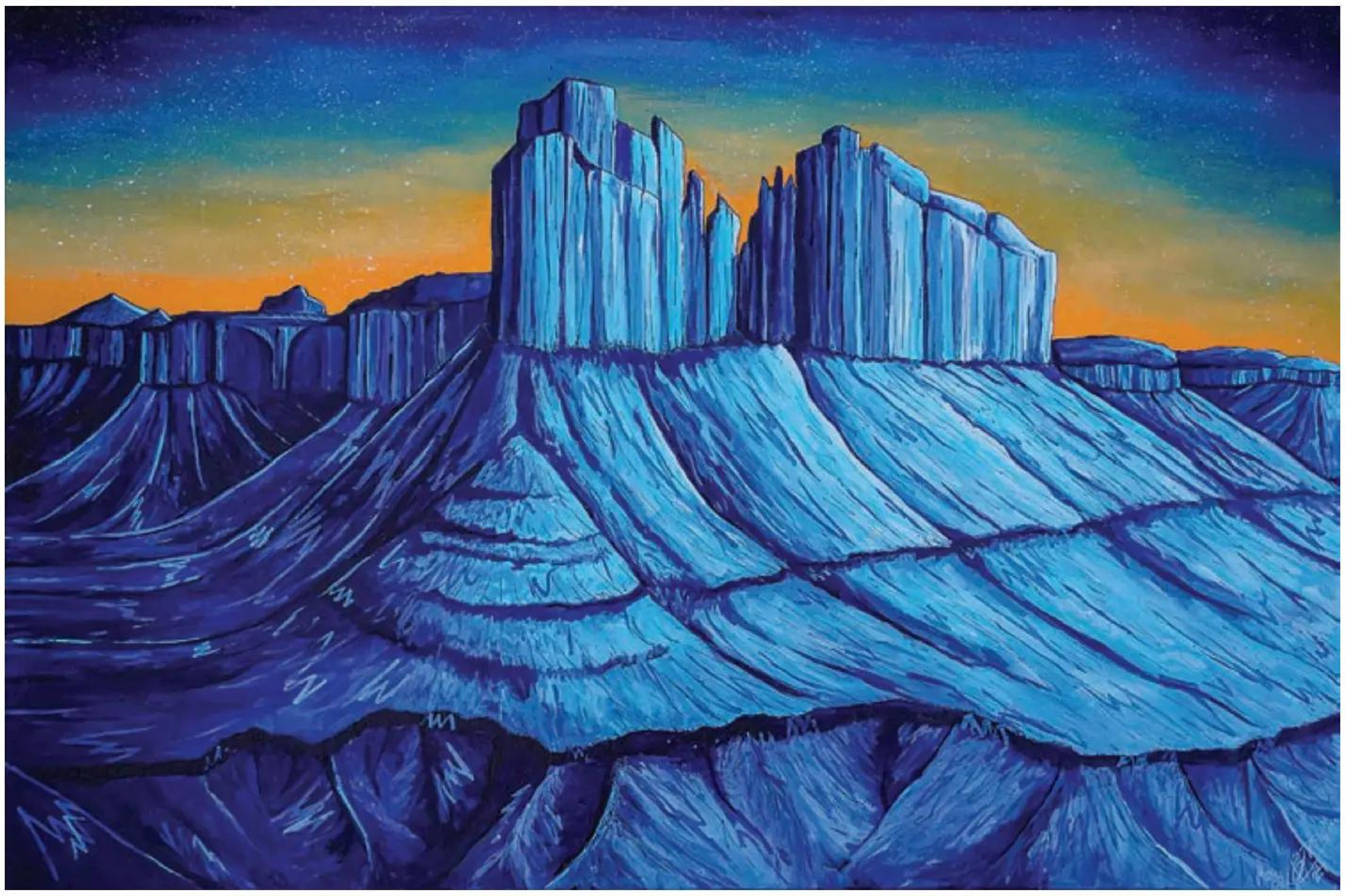
While my dad went through surgery after surgery, I went to live with my mom's friend. My teenage sister stayed with one of her high school friends.

When I finally saw him again, it was in the hospital, after what felt like forever. The man there didn't look like my dad, with his face wiped off and pieced back together, with just one eye, and limbs a mess. This stranger couldn't have been my dad. He couldn't even walk. My dad was the strongest person I knew. I didn't understand. I didn't understand where my dad had gone.

From then on, everything changed, and we struggled even more than before. My dad finally came home, and we all adjusted as best we could. The first great injustice I noticed in life was that my dad's health insurance didn't cover most of his medical costs. My parents did everything they could to stay afloat, and my mom took on multiple jobs. At one point she even wore a cartoon kangaroo costume at Finley's Fun Center, where she was kicked and poked by unruly kids. At least my dad was home, but for a long time he could only make spaghetti and other simple meals, since his arm wasn't fully healed, and just getting around was difficult for him.

I learned that life was different now. It was us versus the bank, and the bank wanted to take everything we had. We couldn't let that

[Facing Page] **Eden takes in the accomplishment after climbing (and cleaning) Necronomicon, her first 5.14 on gear. In her essay "Painting Resilience," published in *Alpinist* 82, Eden reflected on the importance of climbing in her life: "The vertical world offers a way for me to push myself physically and mentally, to overcome obstacles and find peace in the serenity of nature."** Spencer McKay **|** [This Page, Left] **Eden and her nieces dress up to go out trick-or-treating in Moab, Utah.** **|** [This Page, Center] **Eden and her family together in Kentucky in 2020.** **|** [This Page, Right] **Rockhounding around Moab with her nieces in 2012.** Courtesy Mary Catherine Eden



happen. We had to work hard, and though we still had our freedom, it came with a cost.

We had barely caught our breath when my sister, ten years older than me and a trusting seventeen, had her first baby. More than ever, it was all of us against the bank, and all of us pitching in to raise that little girl. She was wonderful, and we tried to fill her life with as much love and magic as we could manage.

Life was hard and strange. We welcomed my sister's second child four years after her first. The two adorable little girls lived in Georgia with their mom, who was starting a new life and transitioning from her career as an EMT/firefighter to become a paramedic. A few years later, needing to be closer to family, she parked a small trailer on our land. This time she had a new husband in tow and plans for further career growth, becoming a flight paramedic. As always, we stuck together through it all, knowing it takes a village to survive. I had become my nieces' babysitter as soon as I was old enough to be useful, and now that they were right next door, my help was needed constantly. Meanwhile, my parents kept working full-time, always striving to keep our world from collapsing. Just when things seemed to have settled into a rhythm, four years after the second child, I became an aunt for the third time.

Unfortunately, the fathers of the girls weren't much help. They were absent most of the time. The new husband, the youngest child's father, was the worst. We voted him off our family island when he decided he wanted someone exactly ten years younger than his wife: me, a child. It changed me forever. I learned too quickly how scary it is to be alone with and much smaller than someone else. His actions shattered our fragile stability. I told my sister; she got rid of him, and then it was just us again—my parents, me, my sister and three beautiful little girls.

Before I knew it, I was a teenager carting three kids around wherever I went. The youngest nearly died of sudden infant death syndrome and ended up with brain damage. She was found in time for my sister to perform lifesaving CPR. Later, she was diagnosed with epilepsy as well as intellectual disability. For six years, she was nonverbal and practically blind; her eyes could physically see, but her brain couldn't process the images. It took all of us to care for her, and because I was still young with only school to worry about, I became her day-to-day caretaker. I had the time, so I made sure she had whatever support I could give.

My sister believed in growth to constantly improve her life. She had succeeded in becoming a flight paramedic, and by the time I was a junior in high school, she had her sights set on becoming a law enforcement ranger for the National Park Service. That meant big changes: applying to and attending the academy, searching for and applying for jobs, landing a seasonal position and moving somewhere new. All of that would be challenging with three young girls in tow. So, she decided to get a head start, and left the children with us at home. The plan was for me to bring them out to her in Moab, Utah, once the girls and I were all finished with school for the summer.

I was only supposed to stay with the girls in Moab between graduating high school and starting college at Eastern Kentucky University, just two months. But it turned out to be impossible for my sister to launch a new career and care for them without a support system. Those two months stretched into a year, then into two. Even while dragging the girls on hikes and micro-adventures, I realized I loved the Moab landscape.

I felt like I was living in a canvas of the American West. In addition to the canyons and rivers, I was surrounded by sandstone towers and arches that loomed over valleys filled with hardy desert plants. I found myself drawn to every adventure—hiking, exploring, kayaking and backpacking became a way of life. But more than that, Moab ignited a fire in me to take my art seriously. I went from painting and drawing fantasy scenes to painting the real world around me. Moab was more beautiful than any fantasy landscape I had conjured in my mind as a child.

[Facing Page, Left] **Eden teaching herself how to lead on Banana Peel (5.10a) during her first summer of rock climbing.** Catrina Eden | [Facing Page, Right] ***Frida Darko of the Desert*, and acrylic painting created through a collaboration between Eden and Brittany Goris.** Courtesy Mary Catherine Eden | [This Page] **Eden goofing around with Tom Randall in Moab's Crack House. She had made a bet with Randall that she could climb with him on her back. He bet against Eden—and lost.** Shawn Cope

That first summer, as I was driving the girls to see some petroglyphs, I noticed people rock climbing on the side of the road for the first time. Curious, I pulled over and asked them questions about what they were doing.

"Trad climbing," one said, proudly shaking a rack of shiny gear over his head. He and his friends were sipping beers and sitting in camp chairs placed directly under people climbing above. They told me that I could buy what I needed at a local gear shop. I turned the car around and headed straight to the store. I bought a helmet, a belay device they told me was an ATC, a rope, quickdraws for sport climbing and a copy of *How to Rock Climb!* by John Long. Until that day, I thought climbing was about summiting Everest and maybe dying along the way.

In climbing I found freedom. Once again, I was racing into a landscape brimming with wonder and the unknown. I felt like a kid—everything was new and every little thing was an adventure. I didn't have any partners at first, so I bribed my non-climbing friends to belay me on bolted 5.7 slabs along Potash Road, where I'd met the friendly climbers.

I wanted to learn how to trad climb, but the gear was too expensive. Through the grapevine, I learned about an older guy who was selling some used rigid-stem Friends. I was told that he was a crusty desert rat who worked as a climbing guide. I got his number and set up a meeting to buy his antiquated cams.

We met up at Wall Street, the roadside crag I'd come to know so well. He took one look at me and said we should climb a pitch before he'd sell them to me. We climbed a moderate crack. My lead-belay skills were abysmal because he was the first person I'd ever belayed. He refused to sell me the old trad gear. Instead, he lent it to me with the understanding that I'd pass it on when I got newer equipment.

It was about then that I discovered a deep desire to climb a desert tower. Nothing seemed more exhilarating than standing on top of one. I begged my new mentor to climb Castleton—a 300-foot monolith capping a high talus cone above Utah's Castle Valley—with me.

"Not yet," he said.

"When, then?" I asked.

"When you lead your first 5.10 trad route."

Determined to prove myself, I learned how to keep my composure on the sharp end of the rope while placing the old rigid-stem Friends into cracks well enough so that they might actually catch me if I fell. Eventually I led Lucy in the Sky with Potash (5.10), trusting those ancient "sticky cams." As a reward, my newfound trad dad took me up Castleton Tower's North Chimney (5.9). He literally hauled me at one point because I was too overwhelmed by the exposure and couldn't pull my body weight up at the top of the third pitch.

Standing on the island of rock more than 1,500 feet above Castle Valley, I faced my very first rappel. I'd forgotten to mention that I had no idea how to set it up. My partner had gone over the lip and was waiting for me at the next anchor while I hesitated on top. I knew how to belay, so I figured a rappel was like that except I needed to hold both sides of the rope. I played around for a while, testing my setup before finally committing to it.

"I almost didn't come down," I admitted once I'd caught up to him. I hunched over the cordelette that connected me to the anchor, trying not to look down.

"Where would you have gone, then?" he asked.

I realized he was right. There was no way out but down, and I just needed to keep going. The entire day felt like a near-death experience, yet I discovered I wanted more, even if the exposure made my stomach churn.

MY SISTER'S CAREER TOOK HER to the Grand Canyon. I resisted joining her at first. I had started building my own life in Moab: taking online courses, dating and working a part-time job that fit around the girls' schedules. So, my sister and the girls moved and I stayed behind, climbing and meeting people who were just like me, frothing for adventure. A few months later, I got the call to join my sister's family at the

South Rim of the Grand Canyon to nanny the girls because the only available daycare couldn't accommodate my niece's special needs. I dropped everything, quit my retail job and moved. The arrangement worked until it didn't. Less than a year later, they moved back to Kentucky to be closer to my parents, who could offer more help.

Now finally on my own, I moved to Flagstaff, Arizona, to attend school. I met someone and briefly moved to Louisiana while they finished their engineering degree. My plan was to work full-time, save money and hopefully find an internship with the National Park Service. Just when I finally felt like I was living my own life, my parents lost their home to a fire while I was visiting during the holidays.

I'll never forget how numb I felt standing outside in the rain just a couple of days after Christmas, watching the roof of my childhood home go up in flames as we waited for the fire department. My parents had to rebuild from scratch. I helped where I could, and once again, my family came together to get through it. They moved in with my sister and built a tiny home over the next few years. But this time, I didn't drop everything and move back permanently, as I would have done in the past. I realized I wanted more in life than to just survive so that others could thrive. I moved back to the place that made me happiest: Moab.

> *I wanted to learn how to fail while chasing big dreams, and my dreams just so happened to be focused on the White Rim.*

I used to see every climb as a break from relentless stress, a chance to leave behind the weight of everything I couldn't fix in the real world and step into a realm with tangible results and consequences, a space stripped to its essentials: either you did the climb or you didn't; either you emerged unscathed or you didn't. I loved the paradox of climbing's complicated simplicity. To me, climbing was mostly about fun and play, going on adventures with new friends and laughing at the absurd. At a certain point it stopped being about a desire to have a new life and identity, and I started to progress as a climber.

Meanwhile, I began exploring climbing photography. My art evolved from capturing idealized landscapes of the Southwest to experimenting with climbing-themed imagery. I also followed a desire to teach other people how to climb, and how to climb *well*. I found that I wanted to share the happiness I felt in every way I could.

I loved the desert and sharing my knowledge and inspiration so much that I got an internship as an interpreter at Arches National Park, explaining the history and natural wonders to visitors. Once I left the NPS, I became a hiking guide, then a climbing and canyoneering guide. The job was everything I liked about interacting with visitors when I was with the NPS, but it felt more natural because it allowed me to have deeper discussions with people for longer. I even did some river guiding to round out the work. My climbing focus had become more about teaching others. I didn't want to guide forever, but I knew I wanted to teach forever.

Several years into my routine of seasonal guiding, taking certification courses, working on my art and photography, and traveling, I started to feel restless. I needed something more, a shift in my life, and at the time, that meant taking "hard climbing" more seriously. I never thought I'd climb a 5.12 cleanly; I was all about onsighting or not climbing at all, and I rarely gave a route more than a couple of tries. Summits mattered more to me than sending, executing a series of moves without weighting the rope.

That mindset changed in 2018 when I got a message from a good friend asking if Tom Randall and Pete Whittaker—the famous "Wide Boyz"—could stay at my place for a month. Gulping down anxiety, I said yes, canceled my climbing plans and panic-cleaned the house. My place was always overrun by climbers—on the porch, the couch, the driveway, and even under the kitchen table. From March to November, it felt like a swarm of crack-addicted goblins would move in. But this was different.

Meeting my heroes and discovering that they're even better as people than as climbers was incredible. The Wide Boyz were amazing guests. To help me become stronger, they built me a crack trainer, a homemade wooden contraption designed to mimic different-sized roof cracks. They slept on my porch, joked and slowly shared tiny morsels of climbing wisdom. I felt inspired. Before their visit, my "training" amounted to random exercises I thought would help my overall fitness. Tom noticed and wrote me a real training plan, and soon after, I sent my first 5.12.

Still, I didn't see myself as a "hard" climber. It felt like a fluke when I sent my first 5.12, Swedin–Ringle, a pumpy ringlock crack with a difficult anchor clip; so did my first 5.13, the infamous Crack House, a long roof-crack boulder problem with a scary topout established by Dean Potter; and also my second 5.13, Supreme Manliness, an offwidth roof crack in Castle Valley. I liked all crack sizes and angles. The goal of 5.12 in every size led to 5.13 in every size. I never really acknowledged that I was getting stronger; I just felt like I was "stubborning" my way up climbs and going after silly, arbitrary goals. Growing up the way I did had taught me to rely on sheer willpower. Just like in my early life, I was in survival mode with my climbing. Either I would break or I would send. I just kept going, focused on the next move, never stopping to appreciate how far I'd come.

Eventually I felt really comfortable pursuing traditional 5.13 routes. I seemed to understand what I needed in order to accomplish my goals, which included just enough training on sport routes to round out my fitness and skill sets. I felt like I was really coming to learn the ins and outs of the way my brain worked—for example, that I like to warm up to things. I don't do well with what I call "genre shifts." If I've been climbing trad a lot, I need twentyish leads on sport to switch to a sport brain. And I've learned that it takes me a week to warm up mentally for the alpine. I do better the more I'm exposed to something, and now I do my best to schedule that into my plans.

While I still loved adventure climbing on long routes with even longer walks, navigating chossy rock and chasing summits, I desired to see where I could really go. *Where was my limit?* I felt itchy to discover what was next. *What if I started thinking about taking on huge goals where I would most likely fail?* Sure, up to this point I was climbing things that were hard, but I wasn't climbing things that I thought I might never be able to do. Aware of my strong work ethic, I was curious if that aspect of myself could help me truly put myself out on a limb and fail, over and over. I wanted to learn how to fail while chasing big dreams, and my dreams just so happened to be focused on the White Rim.

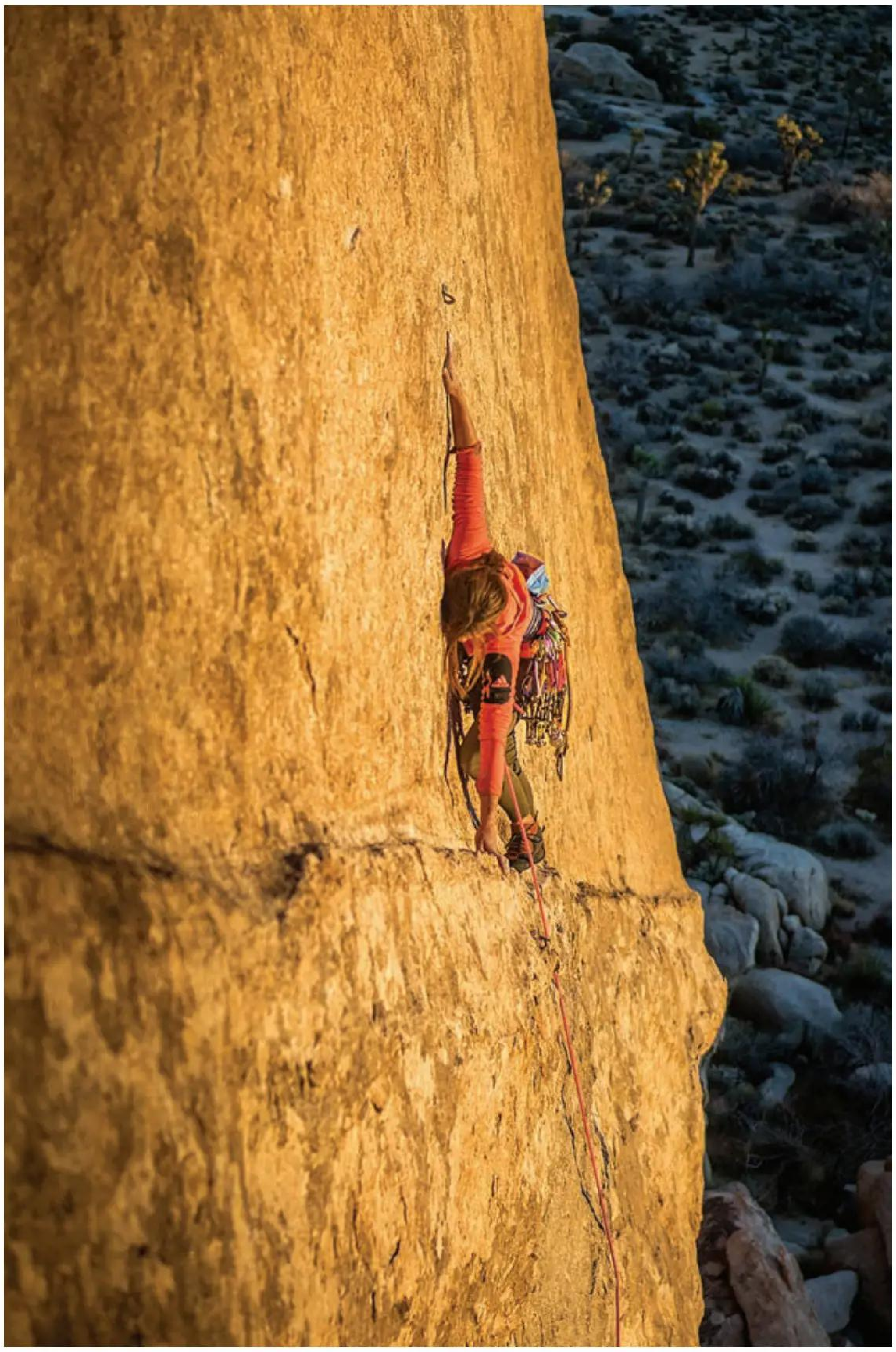
Just thinking about those daunting roof cracks made my palms sweat. When I actually went out there to look at them, my stomach sank. That uncomfortable, vibrating energy told me one thing: deep down, I really, really wanted to try.

The moment came in 2020 when Tom told me it was time I tried my first 5.14. All I needed was that little nudge. I remember scoffing at the idea, coming up against a mental barrier: *That grade wasn't for me, it was never even in my sights.* But then once the initial resistance gave way, I started to think, *Why not? Why wouldn't I give it a try and just start the process like I had done before?*

At this point I had already taken my climbing career farther than I'd ever expected to. I was teaching my own crack camps, which had been a dream of mine since my first day working as a guide. The camps filled me with a lot of purpose and introduced me to so many people who were stoked to learn, as well as to climbers who were in the same position I'd been in when I met Tom for the first time, thinking that climbing "hard" routes isn't for them. I found that sharing my climbing brought me great joy and pride.

After an initial scouting mission to the White Rim in the autumn of 2020, Necronomicon (5.14a) became the first route that I specifically trained for. It presented a beautiful, 100-foot rainbow of cam sizes, ranging from ringlocks to fists, across the underside of the caprock, but with grand exposure to the Canyonlands spilling away below. It was time for me to really try and fail big. I planted myself under a new crack trainer that I'd constructed with friends to prepare myself for the marathon of upside-down climbing, and I also started being more mindful of my health. That included getting surgery to fix a traumatic tendon injury I had sustained a couple of years earlier while climbing Mark of the Beast (5.13b, 500') in Yosemite. It was also during this time that I returned to school for a business degree, becoming the first in my family to earn a bachelor's.

On October 14, 2022, I became the first woman to climb Necronomicon, joining a small group of women known to have sent 5.14 trad. It had taken me nine days of attempts. I couldn't help crying when I reached the other side of the traverse and touched down on the pedestal at the end. I learned how afraid I was of potentially letting my friends down who had supported me. I learned I needed to work on that. Without going through that process and finding where I was mentally weak, I would've ignored and hidden from the trepidation I felt when I made the ten-minute walk to look at Black Mamba next door.



[Top] **A group photo taken after Eden taught a crack climbing clinic, aka Crack Camp, in Moab in May 2024.** Chris Uy | [Bottom] **Mercadi Carlson climbs Sidewinder (5.10b) in Joshua Tree National Park. Eden is a photographer as well as a painter. "For me, art is a snapshot in time," she wrote in *Alpinist* 82, "capturing the laughter of my climbing partner, the shadow of movement against the rock, an approaching thunderstorm or the bright light shining from a vista on a sunny day."** Mary Catherine Eden

[Photo] **Eden, spotted by Samantha MacIlwaine, on Necronomicon. Eden made the first female ascent of the route in 2022; it was her hardest climb yet. On February 6 of this year, Eden reflected on Instagram about how certain climbs felt out of reach when she was just getting started: "But over the years, I started asking myself why I was waiting. Little by little, I worked my way through climbs that once felt impossible, each one shifting the way I saw my own limits."** Spencer McKay

A year later, I'm taping up to climb out from the depths of the Black Mamba cave. The cruxes are harder and the crack is longer. It just has *more*. *Maybe even too much*, I think. But this time, I am aware of how much I actually love going for big dreams—the planning and preparation. The grunt work. *Especially the grunt work*. I've learned how natural I feel in dark places, facing odds that can seem insurmountable.

"What happened to you that made you so stoked to live in this dark, creepy cave?" Spencer teases.

He's been here supporting me through my efforts on Necronomicon, and now this, never climbing for himself, just helping me chase my goals. I originally met him when he turned up at one of my crack camps and I bullied him about his terrible technique. Years later, he was sending his own 5.13 trad routes and helping me teach the camps. He always shows up when I ask for support.

I've come to realize it's in these grimy, obscure places that I've found a renewed sense of wonder and have met others who refuse to give up easily; who know that it takes a village to achieve big things.

I've put in the work to get here. I've been building fitness for the Mamba on my crack trainer through the brutal heat of summer. Unlike on Necronomicon, this time I feel free from the crushing anxiety. I feel like I'm having fun, climbing solely for myself. Playing.

I pull into the start of the crack from the sit start, lifting myself off the bouldering pads, and begin what feels like a mile of hand sizes. After three finger-crack cruxes, I reach the roped finish at the inverted offwidth. On its own, this section is called the Angry Pirate Finish and earns a grade of 5.13.

Don't fall, don't fall, don't fall, I keep telling myself as I approach the lip of the roof. I'd dropped the send here on a previous attempt, mere feet from salvation. I keep my body wedged and thrutch awkwardly from the upside-down position to right side up. Just a few feet of vertical struggle remain … At last I flop onto the flat surface of the rim. Exhausted. Satisfied.

Sending was nice, but refining the process I learned on Necronomicon to send Black Mamba—learning how to set myself up to tackle my biggest projects yet—was even better.

After twenty-eight turbulent years, my family has finally settled into a better place. My parents are doing well. My nieces are happy and pursuing their interests, though none of them have taken to climbing. My sister is happily married to a kind, helpful man.

I remain in Utah, continuing my obsession with desert cracks. Every failure is a step in the journey of incremental success. Every grueling project continues to teach me that life isn't meant to be pristine. It's raw, unrefined. And completely real. ▮

THE ALPINIST PODCAST

SEASON 22

We love hearing about hard sends—the jams, the smears, the sweat that goes into reaching the tops of routes. But even more important are the personalities pulling it off. In this season, host Abbey Collins digs deeper into the people behind the climbs.

Climbing Isn't Everything with Beth Rodden

At the height of her career Beth Rodden established herself as one of the best rock climbers in the world. But while she was making headlines for scaling some of the hardest routes in Yosemite, Rodden was also quietly struggling in the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Rodden shares her story, as it's documented in her new memoir, *A Light Through the Cracks*.

Other Everests with Jonathan Westaway, Peter Hansen and Sarah Pickman

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the 1924 British Mt. Everest Expedition, and the disappearance of George Mallory and Sandy Irvine. Now, a group of scholars and climbers is shedding light on the people and ideas who have traditionally been left out of stories about Chomolungma. *Other Everests* tells stories from new perspectives—of people and things that have long been overlooked.

The Best Climber in the World with Rick Accomazzo

Rick Accomazzo came of age in the climbing world as part of the Stonemasters—a name adopted by a group of friends largely climbing in Yosemite, Tahquitz and Suicide Rocks in the 1970s. Five decade later, his new book *Tobin, the Stonemasters, and Me* tells the story of Accomazzos's friend Tobin Sorenson—perhaps, as Accomazzo claims, the best climber in the world.

LIVE NOW WHEREVER YOU LISTEN TO PODCASTS

GET IT ON Google play | LISTEN ON Spotify | iTunes

visit alpinist.com/podcast for more information

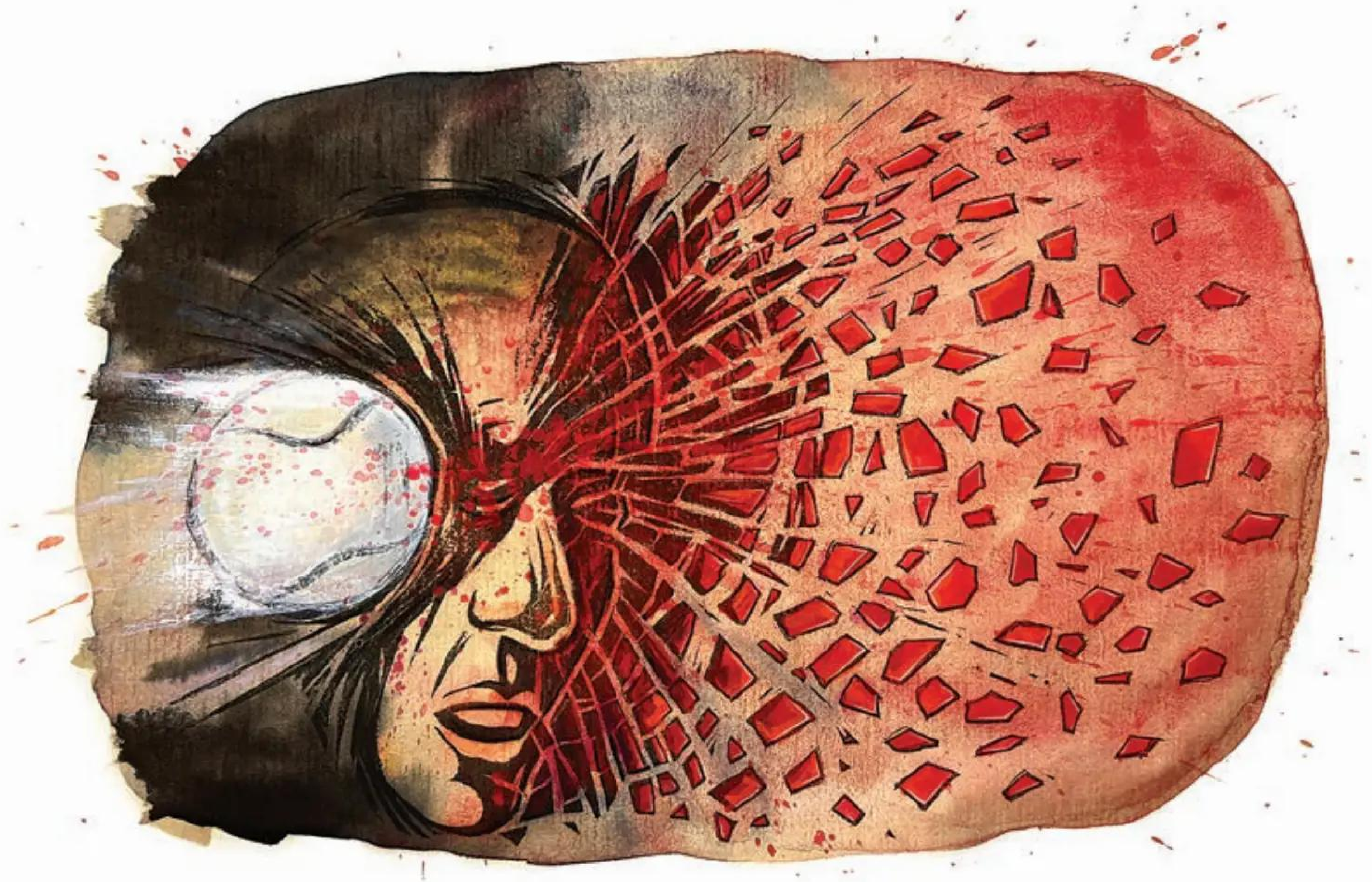
THE Alpinist PODCAST

patagonia

FULL VALUE

Jill Wheatley | *Illustrations by Andreas Schmidt*

Ascending Beyond Sight



Bavaria, Germany, September 2014

My right temple was struck with a force that felt like it came directly from an aluminum baseball bat, rather than the ball that had been hit in my direction at ninety kilometers per hour from thirty meters away. At impact, life began moving in slow motion. Within a blink of an eye, without time for conscious reasoning, I knew the injury was extreme. As if from the eye of an eagle soaring above the field where I sat, injured, I witnessed my life change immeasurably in a split second.

That morning had begun like any other. Daylight hours were fading fast while autumn's amber graced the German countryside as September settled in. Eyes open in the night's silence, I glanced at my watch and then stepped out of bed a little after four, long before the sunrise and minutes before my first alarm sounded. (I would always set multiple alarms at odd minutes, though they were rarely necessary.)

It was years before climbing entered my life, but I'd always been an athlete. I sipped on hot coffee while layering up in Lycra for a seventy-five-kilometer training ride around Lake Starnberg, Bavaria's second-largest body of water. Back home, I put my bike away and packed myself breakfast and lunch before driving the twenty-five minutes through winding countryside to the international school where I taught sports, exercise and health science and coached cross-country.

The overcast grey sky suggested a light rain jacket might be prudent for my first lesson of the day. Brighter than the weather outside were the eager eyes of my tenth-grade students, gleaming with excitement as they took in the stack of baseball bats. We quickly reviewed key skills from previous lessons before I demonstrated technique and randomly split the twenty teens into three skill development stations where they would practice with gloves, balls and bats.

Within minutes of the students splitting off into groups, I was cradling my head. I sat leaning on my left side, resisting the temptation to get horizontal on the damp grass. Like a kaleidoscope, the scene in front of me changed often and nonsensically: Melinda, a teaching colleague, running toward me with her long brown hair blowing in the autumn air, each movement stretched out, almost ethereal; green scrubs and the stubble of a dark beard, too close for comfort, intersecting the beams of surgical ceiling lights; me in the fetal position sandwiched between a car's door, passenger seat and floor while feeling like saturated laundry being tossed in a tumble dryer. Somewhere amid the chaos an ER team was content with my condition. Satisfied that I knew my name and where I was, they gave the green light for our school athletic director, Andy, and Melinda to drive me home. I used my hands to try to cushion my cranium as I longed for the rumbling to stop.

Back in my loft I felt agitated and stirred slowly, restlessly, in search of comfort and ease on my lumpy mattress centered on a wooden frame. Rustic walls and windows loomed above—cattle and corn, sheep and shovels mingled in the barn below. The throbbing in my head intensified; with every pulse I heard calls from within to toughen up, echoed by *This is not right*. Deep within, I housed a sense of certainty there was more to this "black eye" than color and closure. But who was I to question medical experts?

The following evening, a friend flew in from the UK to accompany me in competing at the World Duathlon Championships in Zofingen, Switzerland. Instead, Chris brought me back to the emergency room. This time, an MRI showed my brain bleeding and swelling, cocooned in a fractured skull. The misdiagnosis and the avalanche of other problems triggered by the traumatic brain injury (TBI) led me to death's doorstep.

Time felt as if it were standing still. In reality, it took about ten days for doctors to get the swelling under control and for the bleeding to cease. A few days later, I slowly started moving, but movement was unnatural, unfamiliar and unstable. Reality started to sink in. My arms extended like the wings of an airplane as I walked and my forward momentum wavered. With my right hand in constant contact with a wall, each slow, shuffled step necessitated a break, a deep breath and deeper self-talk. The hammering in my head horrifically intensified with any attempt to satiate my craving for movement. I fought to mask my feelings, my

With what felt like the weight of the world on my head, I endured months where conversing and trying to understand where my life was headed inevitably buried me further.

fears. I began to fear labels, loss, stereotypes and stigma; my morale plummeted. As I settled into darkness, and with shame in my scars, the only hope I had—to not wake to see another day—grew stronger.

My days were filled with different therapies targeting motor function, coordination, balance, sensation and depth perception. Each therapist had their own guaranteed fix that turned out to be anything but. It was an infuriating pattern that felt like what I now recognize as a series of false summits.

Tübingen, Germany, February 2015

After six months of medical care in a trauma hospital, doctors moved me to an eye specialist in Tübingen. There, my providers determined that the complexity of the trauma to my brain had left me with vision coming solely from my lower left eye. Essentially, paralysis of my right eye threw my body and my world off-balance. My "black eye" would never reopen. I would spend the rest of my life with limited eyesight.

Each eye has an optic nerve, a one-way connection responsible for carrying signals from the world to the brain. My right one was destroyed. Suddenly I was forced into a new way of seeing the world. With my left eye now naturally focused on the ground, I learned I needed to make an exaggerated vertical movement with my head to see above the horizon. Looking someone in the eye took physical effort. With what felt like the weight of the world on my head, I endured months where conversing and trying to understand where my life was headed inevitably buried me further.

At the same time, my brain was trying to heal without nourishment. From the time I'd lain listless in the loft, I'd experienced a severe loss of appetite, which resulted in life-threatening complications. Plummeting to less than half my healthy body weight, I was diagnosed with Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), which is oftentimes, as in my case, associated with trauma.

The physical, cognitive and emotional nuances of my brain injury were further complicated by language barriers and insurance bureaucracy, all of which led to a phone call to my brother back in Canada; I was days from death. Ryan was granted power of attorney when I was deemed incapable of sound intellectual decision-making. With a baby less than a month old at home, Ryan flew to Germany to accompany me back to Canada to a treatment center near his home in southern Ontario. I put him through hell, begging him to leave me to heal in his basement while I was trying to take my own life. There was no light.

Soon my need for specialized medical care led me to Colorado. I was fitted with a gastrojejunal tube, which became my lifeline as I refused medication. Depleted and withering, I imagined a life without vision, appetite, autonomy, a sense of self, confidence, trust, independence, flexible thinking, patience, relationships, European residency, a German working visa, an apartment, a car and a driver's license. I didn't see anything worth fighting for.

I felt alone and lost despite consistently being in the care of others. After five months of intense medical intervention, I started to gain independence. In the final months of 2016, I was placed in a partial hospitalization program to ease my transition to living on my own. Once my weight was restored and I was showing signs of cognitive improvement, the doctors discharged me from the final treatment center in Denver. But as I cast off alone for the first time in twenty-six months, there were no signs, no direction and no one to lead me along life's trail with a disability. Desolate, I relied on my internal compass to guide me in search of solace, serenity and a sense of purpose amid mountains.

Europe, Spring 2017

Jaded from being in the control of others, ashamed of the way paralysis had changed my face, broken by the physical impact of restoring my weight and unwilling to accept the loss of autonomy, I chose to explore alone with Mother Nature while the earth made one rotation around the sun. Sheltering from the staring eyes of society, I chose trails amid thirteen massifs on five continents. I planned mainly around the seasons, dodging snow and monsoon rains. With no depth perception, I anticipated that navigating roots and rocks would be challenging enough without the addition of seasonal elements.

From spring to summer and through autumn, I transitioned with the seasons. I traveled through Europe, following paths through the French and Slovenian Alps and the Italian Dolomites. I visited the foothills of Ladakh in northern India and discovered light on my trail into the Nepal Himalaya before winter. I grew fitter and more grateful, but I still hadn't accepted my new reality.

Nepal, Autumn 2017

In a surreal series of serendipitous situations, ten months after I was released from the last treatment center, I raced my first ever ultramarathon, the Annapurna 100. A year earlier, in a concrete jungle, I was still limited to thirty-minute walks a few times per week, accompanied by a therapist and his canine companion. Now, surrounded by a slew of eager athletes, I ran through the dark on uneven ground covered in rocks and roots, convincing myself that if I could stay on my feet until dawn, the rest of the day would be manageable. Though I had not properly trained, I had moved through hundreds of kilometers and tens of thousands of meters of elevation gain in recent months, so I wasn't worried about the long day ahead. I finished third in the race, and with a smile as grand as the mountains that embraced me, I stood on the podium certain I was not finished with Nepal.

My debut performance in the Himalayan trail running scene caught the attention of the race director. I was invited to be part of the Manaslu Mountain Trail Race, which gave me the opportunity to run 140 kilometers around the world's eighth-highest mountain. The magnitude of Manaslu and its neighbors provided perspective. The scale of the peaks had a way of making my physical limitations, my fear of judgment and of being enough, feel minuscule. I did not change my entire travel blueprint, yet I knew I needed to return to the Himalaya.

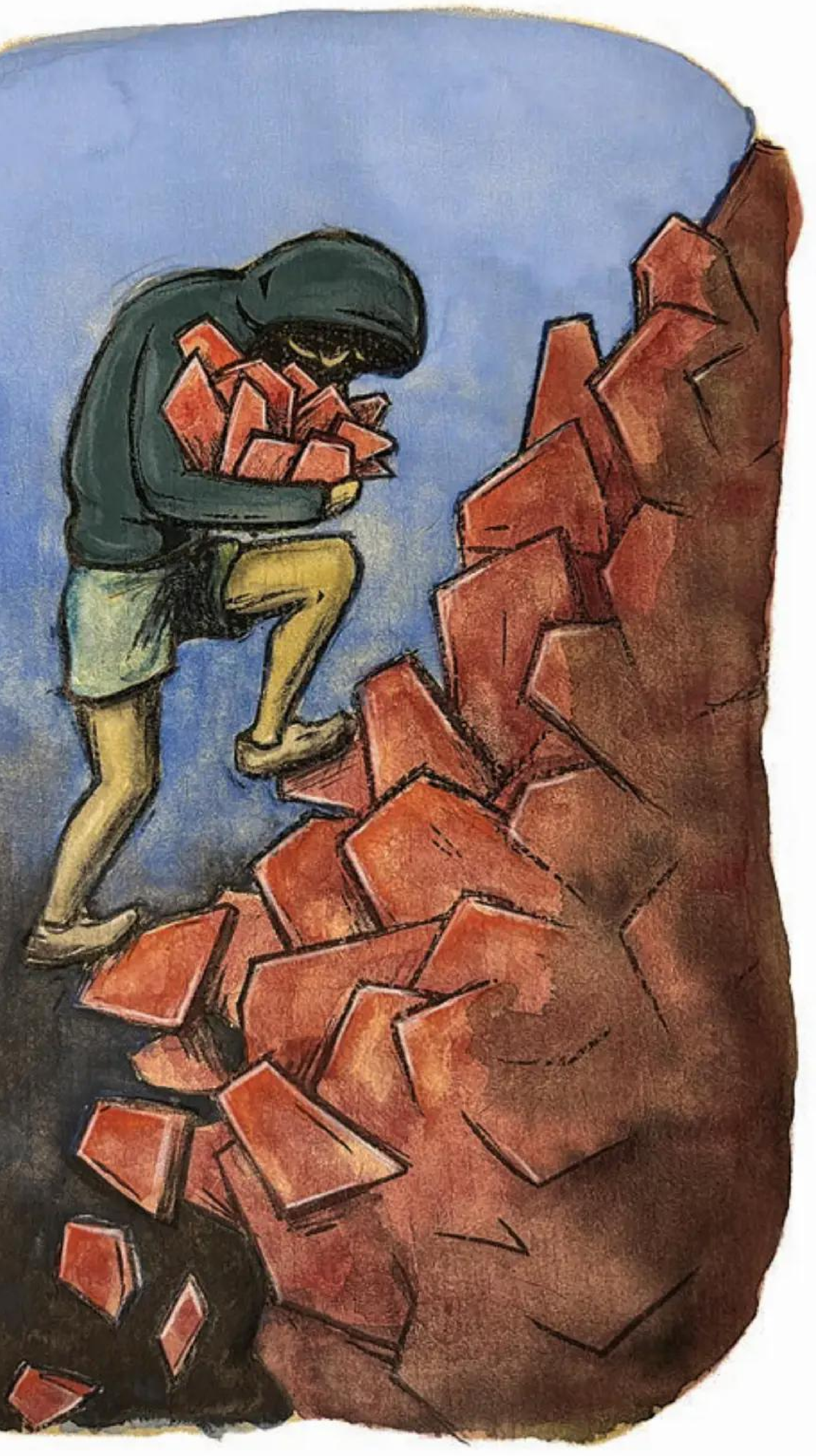
But first, I traveled more of the world—from Australia and New Zealand to Argentina and Peru, then back to Colorado to thank my medical team. I made friends and shared trails in Moab, Utah, and Flagstaff, Arizona, ahead of spending a summer between Switzerland and France. After one year, hundreds of trails and thousands of vertical kilometers, I still felt lost when it came to navigating my life's direction, so I followed my intuition and my fascination with altitude back to South Asia.

Fastpacking throughout Langtang, Annapurna and Khumbu, I was warmly welcomed into the homes of Nepali friends. Those days were filled with tin roofs, wood-burning stoves, no running water or sanitation and the happiest people. The farther away from civilization I explored, the deeper I connected to myself.

As I hovered around teahouse fires, exchanging stories and curiosity over copious cups of sweet tea, I often shared space with local climbers. We sometimes lost each other in translation before finding each other in laughter. Conversations rooted in adventure and aspirations became as common as the dhal bhat we ate each evening as the sun set—a prelude to the excitement of a new day. The Himalaya were a catalyst: a stimulus to new life.

One night, beneath a massive moonlit sky, the stars felt within reach as frigid air whistled through the rustic window frames of the teahouse where I lay cocooned in musty floral blankets. I physically drifted into rest while my spirit awakened. With altitude came clarity: in the air, the sky and my mind. I was eager to learn what my body was capable of when I moved it closer to the sun.

The following year, I established a home in Kathmandu. My apartment quickly became a hub, a gathering place for friends after sharing belays and belly laughs at Astrek, the neighboring climbing wall. We shared meals, movies, project ideas, proposals and plans. Nestled away from the chaos of the city, my garden became a classroom for lessons in ropework, knots, anchors and abseiling. Boots, belay devices, helmets, harnesses, carabiners, crampons and climbing ropes gradually enhanced my fastpacking setup and the simplicities of mountain running.



The climbing gym was common ground for the local trail running and mountaineering communities. Embraced by both, I felt my sense of confidence grow as I put in the time and commitment to develop skills in the city that would transfer to the high Himalaya. I enthusiastically accepted an invitation from Dawa, a local athlete I had first met at an aid station in the Annapurna 100, to help his family in their teahouse in Pangboche during the busy autumn season. Through such an authentic initiation into Sherpa culture at the base of the Matterhorn of the Himalaya, Ama Dablam (6814m), I would begin to shift to see what I had gained, rather than lost, in the wake of my TBI.

Khumbu Region, Nepal, 2019

I HAD A UNIQUE opportunity to set off on a different peak for my first climb above 6000 meters. I left from Dawa's home, following a traditional Buddhist puja and salt tea with his family. Imja Tse (6189m) appears as an island surrounded by a sea of ice, reflected in its nickname, Island Peak. Marked by unparalleled panoramic views of Everest, Lhotse and Makalu, and featuring minimal technical climbing, my introduction to ascending through thin air was as pristine as the peaks that surrounded me. I was motivated to learn more, and to take on more challenges. Within a handful of days, Dawa and I climbed neighboring Lobuche (6119m). I was building my base.

Like Grand Central Station, my home in Kathmandu became just a quick stop: wash, dry, replenish and move on. *Bistari, bistari* (slowly, slowly) my experience and confidence grew amid rolling foothills and precipitous peaks, in varied technical terrain, topography and conditions, and with diverse companions. In time, I ventured to Ama Dablam.

With no sense of purpose after my recovery, I had chosen the mountains out of existential frustration. Years later, standing on Ama Dablam's summit, I felt like the mountain had chosen me; when I learned that my dad had passed away back in northern Ontario, it felt as if the peak cradled me. While its exquisite features and exposed ridges tested my depth perception, I found myself amid a paradox of hurt and joy. I felt closer to my dad than ever. Standing on the summit, I felt like I'd planted a seed of purpose. I was a beacon shining light on the power of possibility and perspective.

As I developed a bank of experience climbing and skiing high-altitude peaks, I chose to explore what my body was capable of in a type of death zone different from the one trauma had landed me in years earlier. Manaslu (8163m) stood in my backyard.

The name Manaslu is derived from the Sanskrit word *mansa*, which means "soul." Manaslu has weathered thousands of years of storms and quakes, yet the mountain's soul does not live in the past. It has changed over time, and so have I. The peak is strong and present. As I walked away from the colors and crowds of Kathmandu and into Manaslu's shadows, trekking through its foothills, I aimed to become one with the mountain, to embody its strength and resilience.

West-Central Nepal, Autumn 2021

After strength training, running, jumping and climbing through the pandemic lockdown, I arrived at Manaslu Base Camp feeling strong yet disappointed. We had spent more than a week trekking in, rarely seeing signs of life beyond the teahouse stops each evening, yet we arrived at a metropolis of more than 200 tents. It was far from the serenity I longed for. As we acclimatized, yo-yoing to higher camps to get acquainted with thinner air, the solace of our climbing was frequently interrupted by the sounds of helicopters chauffeuring international clients. Moving higher on the mountain, I found myself turning inward.

The mountains of my mind, the way I've come to see my inner struggles, had become increasingly more settled as I spent time in remote places, but now they stirred as climbers filled in the seats in the Base Camp dining tent. Cameras, comparison, complaints and digital connectivity were testing my equanimity. Still, my intrinsic goal kept me quietly focused.

I climbed with two Nepali friends, and our higher camp tent became akin to my place in the city; our local friends who worked as guides gathered inside for coffee, Pringles and noodles once they'd gotten their clients settled. They affectionately called me *Didi* (sister), and I felt like I belonged.

I felt strong and unchallenged as I approached Camp IV (7400m). A smirk appeared on my face as I realized what it was that my traumatic brain injury had set me up for: anything. Through all I had overcome, I had gained physical and mental strength. Still, despite all this power, I managed to disappoint myself. Prior to leaving Base Camp, we had not thoroughly discussed using supplementary oxygen. It was assumed that I would use it from Camp IV, and, considering my lack of experience above 8000 meters, I had not thought otherwise. But given my energy levels, I became set on sleeping and continuing to climb without it. Following a rather heated conversation with one of my climbing partners in our tent, I decided to respect that such decisions shouldn't be made on the periphery of the death zone, and I agreed to use the oxygen. With every kick of my crampons, I was internally kicking myself, certain I could have climbed without the support of the cylinder on my back.

At the summit, I radiated with joy and giddiness. While physically standing high in the Himalaya amid ropes, anchors and prayer flags, mentally I celebrated with every individual who had relentlessly persisted when I was convinced my story was over. I saw a vivid collage of every nurse, nursing assistant, therapist and doctor. I also posed an audible question to my dad, asking what he thought of the view. I wished my brother, who had seen me on death's doorstep, could feel my exhilaration.

Descending from the eighth-highest point on the planet, I was part of the first team to navigate the final stage of the climb via the Rolwaling Diversion; serendipitous thoughts started to surface. My choice to climb into the death zone was a catalyst for unforeseen optimism and direction. As naturally as the air became denser, the name of my next challenge came to me: Vision 8000. I'm not sure my smile had ever been brighter as I decided I would climb all of the 8000-meter peaks. I was sure the rest of the mountains would prove more difficult, but I thrive on challenges, and I was inspired by this new one.

After drawing up a plan with my friend and expedition leader Mingma G., I focused on improving my fitness, developing skills and honing my ability to manage exposure to the harshness of the Himalaya. I climbed Himlung (7126m), notorious for both extreme winds and snowfall, within three weeks of Manaslu. But dodging Himalayan storms was easier than dodging Nepali visa policies. As such, I chose to begin fine-tuning my ice climbing skills and uphill efficiency while backcountry skiing in the Canadian Rockies.

Shadows of Everest, January 2022

My Nepali visa reset as the calendar turned to 2022. I crossed the pond home to Kathmandu and jumped directly on a prop plane to Lukla, gateway to the Everest region and notorious as the world's most dangerous airport. I planned to climb three consecutive 8000-meter peaks and spent my days training with friends on frozen waterfalls and at the Khumbu Climbing Center. I wrapped up my ice climbing season on Losar, a fourteen-pitch route across from Namche Bazaar, on Valentine's Day. Despite the occasion, there wasn't a whole lot of sweetness; we had an unplanned bivy, as well as lessons in partnership and planning that segued seamlessly into my second expedition of Vision 8000.

Dhaulagiri (8167m) challenged my body and mind more than any other mountain experience. I witnessed gear and garbage thrown off the mountain, while my energy plummeted alongside it—everything went downhill following the summit.

Monopolizing on the increased red blood cell count I'd built up on Dhaulagiri, and chasing a narrow weather window, I headed east for Kangchenjunga (8586m). This climb proved difficult in several ways. We took a wrong right turn at 8200 meters and saw the body of a climber who had died in an earlier accident, the impact of which was unexpectedly difficult. The world's third-highest peak was paradoxically dramatic and dreamy.

Next, with a tiny team and short timeline, I turned to Makalu (8485m), considered to be one of the more technical 8000-meter peaks. At Base Camp, I focused on hydrating, fueling and resting as we shared resources with other climbers. Our goal was to be quick: straight to Camp II, then Camp III, summit and get back to Base Camp, all within three days. Mother Nature had other ideas, thwarting our first attempt. We soon planned a second attempt and climbed alongside everyone else who had hoped to summit that season—less than ideal on narrow ridges and blind corners. The only eyesight I have comes from below the horizon of my left eye, which is like witnessing life through the hole of an ice screw; I lack the ability to perceive depth. I have adapted in ways I once thought impossible, yet if I allow the mountains of my mind to drift to what I have lost, appreciation can easily morph into frustration. Sitting on the summit, I felt a clash of disbelief, gratitude and uneasy anticipation of the technical descent. At the same time, I was disappointed in myself for allowing my harsh inner voices to shadow the fact that I was on my third 8000-meter peak in less than two months.

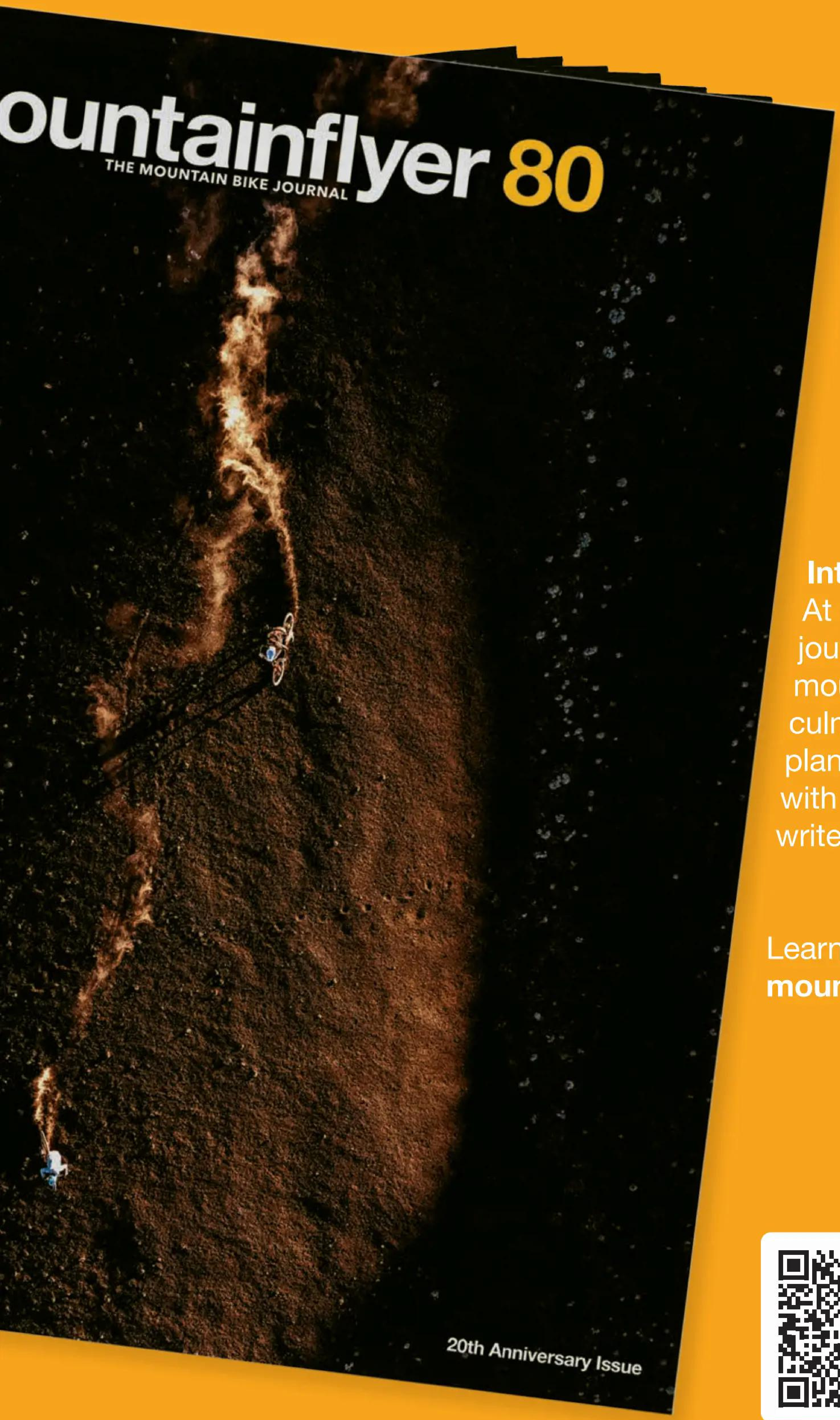
Hunza, Pakistan, June 2022

One of the greatest gifts I have found in climbing is friendship. Such bonds made the transition from Nepal to Pakistan flow like the Indus River. As friends welcomed me into their homes in Hunza, I had time to experience food, roads and rest under the watchful eye of Rakaposhi before moving toward the "Savage Mountain."

The K2 Base Camp trekking route winds its way along the brilliant Braldu Valley before mounting the Baltoro Glacier to Concordia. Serrated and steep, towering cliffs mark each side of the trail under the striking granite spires

mountainflyer
THE MOUNTAIN BIKE JOURNAL

We'll take you there.


ountainflyer 80
THE MOUNTAIN BIKE JOURNAL
20th Anniversary Issue

REIMAGINED

148 Pages.
22" X 12.5" spreads.
Heavy cover stock.
Artistic design.
Reads like a book.

Introducing the new *Mountain Flyer*.
At the start of 2024, we embarked on a journey to redefine the possibilities of a mountain bike magazine. *Issue 80* is the culmination of a year's worth of introspection, planning, design iterations, and collaboration with our community of talented freelance writers, photographers, and artists.

Learn more and subscribe:
mountainflyer.com/subscription

Join us.

I dodged snowstorms and raging rockfall, climbed tight chimneys through crowds and over crevasses. In less than a week's time, I proudly stood atop K2 and Broad Peak, a feat that was still nowhere near the challenge of what I'd dealt with in the wake of my TBI.

of the Trango Towers. With shifting ice and open crevasses, and without my depth perception, travel on the glacier was never mundane.

Throughout the month of July, K2 (8611m) and Broad Peak (8051m) battled for my attention. There were record numbers of climbers in Pakistan and I felt the 8000-meter climbing scene growing around me. Despite the lack of connectivity, Mingma was diligent about checking weather reports and considering different possibilities for our climbs. Because of the way the weather played out, I danced between Broad Peak and K2, spending a couple of rotations on each before everything came together later in the month. I dodged snowstorms and raging rockfall, climbed tight chimneys through crowds and over crevasses. In less than a week's time, I proudly stood atop K2 and Broad Peak, a feat that was still nowhere near the challenge of what I'd dealt with in the wake of my TBI.

By the time I was packing up for a sunrise departure from Base Camp, I was stuffing more than gear into my duffel. With a mix of emotions stirring between elation and disgust, I set off toward Concordia alone. I needed to unpack all that had happened, but I was exhausted. That, and the anticipation of Nanga Parbat—with its reputation for a high fatality rate, challenging terrain, extreme winds and storms—delayed the digestion.

Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, August 2022

NANGA PARBAT (8125M) TRANSLATES from Sanskrit as "Naked Mountain" because of the lack of snow on its south face. I looked forward to its seclusion away from crowds and, since I would be climbing in the offseason, anyone at all.

Moving into the Diamer District, our small team, just a handful of us, had the trail to Base Camp all to ourselves. We arrived in an open meadow shared with grazing cows in the sweltering heat. Pakistan had just suffered one of its worst monsoons ever recorded, making for unseasonably heavy snowfall in the mountains. From Base Camp, we watched avalanches hurtle downward to the roar of skyborne thunder. Rocks rained down between Camp II and the foot of the glacier on our intended route. Mingma made an easy choice: change the route.

After more than two weeks spent changing routes and waiting for clear weather windows, three avalanches hit our chosen line, and we lost all the gear that had been dropped at two of our camps. After weighing possibilities, refusing to risk the life of our team, we called off our expedition. I walked away with a feeling similar to what Michael Gardner described in his *Alpinist* 77 essay, "Worth the Weight?": a duality of emotions between what the mountains give and what they take.

Nepal, February 2023

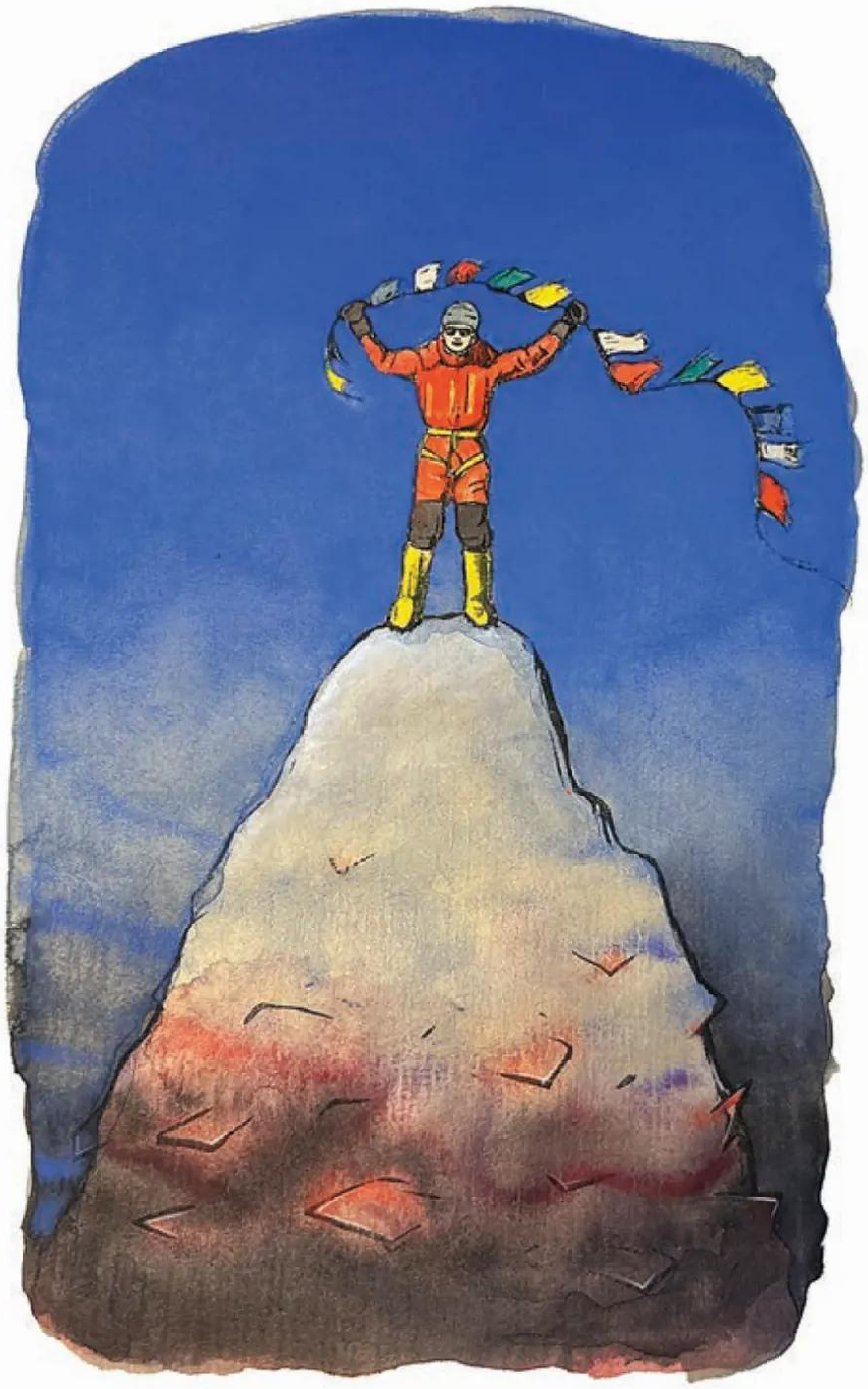
I SPENT THE OFFSEASON back in the Rockies climbing ice, quietly building strength. In February I returned to Nepal, where, on an expedition to Annapurna I (8091m), I began to feel a shift in the mountains of my mind.

The serenity I had found in the mountains became increasingly scarce with each 8000-meter expedition, and that was particularly evident when I arrived at Annapurna Base Camp. Returning to camp from a solo hike on the first day, I felt disgust as I heard speakers blaring excessive beats as if we were at a tailgate party. My head throbbed to the bass of the music and my throat felt dry. With a thermos of scalding hot water mixed with lemon, ginger and honey, I methodically sorted, classified and calculated gear and rations in my attempt to recalibrate. I rested my body while seeking solitude in my tent, anxiously waiting to find out what the group's climbing plan was.

As my own team made our way higher up the mountain, a storm moved in quickly. We couldn't safely stick to our summit plan, so we retreated from Camp II to Base Camp. I was on the first flight to a hospital the next morning. The dry throat I'd been experiencing was more than adjusting to the thinning air, more than a head cold or dehydration. It was its own combination of bronchitis, sinusitis and pneumonia. The trio of diagnoses would have been debilitating in the best of times, never mind trying to fight an infection at altitude while the body simply fights to stay alive.

After a week, my internal storm slowly settled. I was given the green light to leave the hospital and rest at home. In between naps, my sole focus was consuming copious amounts of calories. The storm that had been lingering over the Annapurnas was relentless, but it moved on at the same time I received clearance to climb again after undergoing blood and lung tests at the hospital. The result was that I merged precisely into the same expedition timeline as others who had been waiting out the storm in hotels, clubs and cafes.

I thrive on challenges and in mountains. Upon my return to Annapurna Base Camp, any excitement of a fresh start was shadowed by my focus on the task at hand. I practice Vipassana, a form of meditation, to cultivate mindfulness and to grow my capacity for discomfort, but on this day I struggled to quiet



my mind. As I set off from Base Camp for a second attempt, my body and mind felt depleted. When it came to my TBI, I never had the opportunity to choose any of it: the injury itself, the resulting vision loss, the life-threatening complications that I overcame. However, I did have the choice to use the lessons I'd learned and the strength I'd gained to thrive amid life's climbs. I had survived twenty-six months of hard shit. This shit was up to me.

My heart raced and I coughed up pink frothy spew between short breaths; returning to Camp II felt all too familiar. As I lay my head down to rest, sandwiched between my friend Suman and the frosty tent wall, I got news that a close friend working on Everest was missing and presumed dead; disbelief drained everything left in my tank faster than I could fuel it. Tuning out the noise, I dove into my inner world where existential questions stirred: *Why am I continuing with this project? Does it still align with my values?* Before we even reached the first anchor up from the final camp, it was clear that this summit would push me deeply in body and mind. It was, by far, my toughest day in the Himalaya.

Though I reached the summit, my spirit that flows in the mountains lost its magic on Annapurna. Simply climbing for the sole purpose of ticking a box has no alignment with my internal compass. Rather than running from Annapurna to Everest with a mitt full of medication, I sat with my discomfort, and I gained clarity.

Kathmandu, Nepal, May 2023

Climbing mountains is something I do; it is not who I am.

Without the distraction of record-chasers, racing and route traffic, my higher consciousness greeted me back in Kathmandu. Attuned to my needs, goals and truth, I let my heart and intuition take the lead. Climbing these 8000-meter peaks was not matching my vibration. Amid a scene that has grown incredibly complicated, commercialized and competitive, I chose to walk away.

With my values prioritized, I pivoted proudly and intentionally. Honoring my personal path, I returned to Alberta, for climbing and for clarity. There, I found community and connection, no crowds, no chaos. I chose to stay.

Banff National Park, Canada,
February 2024

I certainly have learned that life does not always go the way we anticipate.

Once upon a chilly February morning, a friend and I raced the rising sun in Banff National Park, searching for a frozen waterfall to scale. Conversation flowed between meditation and mountains, goals and gear, as we hiked. We shared leads and laughs while our focus remained as clear as the sunny skies above. Efficiency and excitement were just as high as I began to lead the fourth and final pitch.

The grade was easy, the ice was garbage. After moving efficiently for three pitches, I began to slow down. Sweat dripped from my brow as I clipped the rope to my first ice screw and breathed a sigh of relief. My breathing calmed and I continued climbing. Higher up, I approached a bulge. I swung a tool and felt it sink into the ice with a solid *thunk*. I looked for a safe and secure spot to place another screw before the protrusion. But as I looked for a good stance over the frontpoints of my crampons, crusty grains of crumbling ice filled my field of vision. Suddenly I was weightless. Within a wink, I hit the deck. I'd broken—shattered, in fact—the only rule in ice climbing: don't fall.

There would be no misdiagnosis in the ER this time. This was not a rolled ankle. Far more than any physical pain, the dark memories of twenty-six months in hospitals flooded my mind as I crawled up toward the belay cave. The response and rescue by Parks Canada was textbook perfect. Calm and efficient, the longline helicopter evacuation would have been much more difficult had the scene been in other parts of the world. I swung through the sky, thankful.

Diligently keeping me warm and laughing until the ER team took over, the Banff paramedics maintained their proficiency, and my comfort, and kept my climbing boot intact. With a broken tibia and fibula and a shattered ankle, I ended up with twenty-nine screws, three plates and bone fragments donated from a soul I will never know. I'm slowly making my way back to climbing, and my scars reflect what humans are capable of overcoming.

In distant reflection, I remember a colorful indoor bouldering wall in one of the German hospitals. It helped me adjust to my recent loss of depth perception, to work on strength and focus, and it marked the beginning of something far bigger a world away. Unbeknownst to me, sustaining a traumatic brain injury set me up with greater resilience and an ability to overcome fear.

Thankful for life lessons in perspective, I climb on. ▮

More than a magazine.

Our new *Alpinist* Premium Membership offers an exclusive experience for passionate climbers and mountaineers.

JIM DONINI GEOFF POWTER
ETHAN BERMAN
THE LIFE OF MICHAEL GARDNER
Alpinist
MOUNTAIN PROFILE
A Mountain of Many Names

YOUR PREMIUM MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES

A Year of Inspiration
Immerse yourself in the world of mountaineering and climbing with four collectible issues of *Alpinist* magazine, delivered to your doorstep.

Share the Adventure
A complimentary one-year *Alpinist* gift subscription for a friend.

Exclusive Perks
Enjoy a 20% discount on *Alpinist* Store merchandise.

A Versatile Tool for Climbers
The *Alpinist* X Spyderco LeafJumper™ knife; a lightweight, mid-sized knife designed and developed specifically to fit the needs of outdoor adventurers and climbers.

Recognition and Community
Your name will be listed on the *Alpinist* website as a Supporting Member, joining a community of like-minded, passionate climbers.

Start Your Premium Membership Today
Alpinist.com/premium

LOCAL HERO

Kapil Bisht on Maya Sherpa

In 2014, Maya Sherpa sat in her tent at K2's base camp, seething at what she'd just heard on the phone from Kathmandu. Fearing her four-year-old daughter's voice would break her resolve, Maya had been learning about her child from her mother. Her girl was fine, Maya's mother assured her, then she related a rumor. Maya and her teammates, so the canard went, would climb to a high camp, call off the ascent citing bad weather and pocket the money raised for the expedition. The lie stung briefly, then galvanized. Maya and her teammates, Pasang Lhamu Sherpa Akita and Dawa Yangzum Sherpa, decided that no matter what, at least one of them had to summit.

Maya learned very early that society didn't like to see women in high places. She was ten when she began noticing that whenever relatives gathered for a meal in her village, the men got the best seats—chairs, benches or raised platforms made cozy with carpets. Women sat on the floor. Maya's uncles and male cousins were served first. Her aunts, even those older than many of the men, ate later. From the unfairness emerged Maya's credo: "Society can only transform when women change." She told herself she'd find a way to inspire young girls.

Time and place were against her. In her village, families threw parties when a son was born. Births of daughters, however, were not celebrated. Boys were sent to school. Girls fetched water, cleaned and cooked—training, as parents saw it, for their lives ahead as wives and mothers. Maya's father, a trekking guide, had been around Western women long enough to know better. He sent Maya to school. He never stopped her from dreaming.

One day when Maya was fourteen, she told off her younger brother for not doing his share of the dishes. Her brother joined the housework roster. Word spread of the young rebel. Some people told her father his daughter was destined for greatness. Others, probably dishwashing duty shirkers, gibed that she would get nowhere. Her father never mentioned the taunts to Maya, but he began encouraging his children to work hard and aim high.

In 2002, as a civil war raged in the countryside, Maya leapt at a chance to work as a trekking guide. Maoist guerillas and Nepal Army soldiers on power trips prowled the wildernesses. Trekking was like stepping into a cage with these two political beasts. Maya's diligence and drive caught her bosses' eyes. Within a year, they gave her a shot at climbing Ama Dablam. She became the first Nepali woman to do so, a feat she repeated on Pumori, Cho Oyu, Baruntse and Khan Tengri. By 2010, she had climbed Everest from the north and south.

That year, she and her husband, Arnold Coster, welcomed a daughter. As she immersed herself in the joys of motherhood, doubts about her climbing life crept in. A half-forgotten slight surfaced. Male climbers had often told her that women just couldn't climb after having kids. "I become very angry when people tell me that I can't do something because I am a woman," said Maya. "Then, I just want to prove them wrong."

True to form, Maya chose the hardest mountain possible. Maya, Pasang Lhamu Sherpa Akita and Dawa Yangzum Sherpa went to K2 partly as their way of reminding women that their dreams did not have to end with marriage. It proved a hard sell. Pasang's and Dawa's families gave in only after months of cajoling. Raising money proved so tough that Maya called it the hardest thing she'd done in her life.

The trio made history as the first-ever Nepali women's team to climb K2. Maya proved that a thirty-plus-year-old wife and mother could still chase dreams. In the years since, Maya has also summited Kangchenjunga, Annapurna I and Makalu.

No one is happier for Maya than her father. No one worries more about her. She's a role model, he reminds her, so it's best to look, think and act the part. Her tattoos, he fears, smudge that image.

Ever wary of roles that are fixed, Maya went and got K2 tattooed on the nape of her neck.

[This Page] **Author Kapil Bisht.** Rupa Lama **|** [Facing Page] **Climber Maya Sherpa. There were questions around whether her group was the first all-women Nepali team to summit K2 because they had support from men. "Sherpas were a support staff and not to help us climb," Maya told *The Outdoor Journal* in 2014.** Kapil Bisht

Off Belay

Through the Mist | *Leo Gambella*

In 2013, I'd recently started working as a photographer in El Chaltén when a period of good weather aligned with my days off. I coordinated with two of my friends, Nestor and Franco, for a three-day trip traversing several mountains, starting from the east ridge of Cerro Grande.

We approached our route from the Cerro Torre valley, hiking through forests and across glacial moraines to the milky waters of Laguna Torre. The lagoon is the source of the Fitz Roy River. That morning the river was swollen and fast-moving and we crossed it using a zip line. Once on the other side, we made our way to the Grande Glacier. Easy travel led us to a clearing in the snow where we set up a bivouac. From there we could see the west face of the Chaltén Massif, the Grande Glacier and the ice-covered south face of Cerro Torre.

We struggled to sleep amid the long daylight hours of summer in the southern hemisphere, so we packed up our equipment and began walking again in the evening light. After several hours, we made it to a plateau, where the winds suddenly picked up. We dug a snow cave and got some sleep while we waited for them to subside before continuing up the east ridge of Cerro Grande on firm snow.

When we were ten minutes away from the summit, we found ourselves submerged in a cloud that reduced our visibility to less than a meter. Again, we hunkered down in a snow cave, where we melted water, ate lunch and took a nap. When I woke up, after a few hours of rest, the clouds were still there. But then suddenly they opened just enough to reveal the summit of Cerro Torre. I took several photos as the clouds moved around, exposing the Southern Patagonian Ice Field and the Chaltén Massif.

The next day dawned clear, and we rappelled down the north face of Cerro Grande. We began to make our way to Cerro Doblado, but instead decided to abort our mission. Even though the trip didn't go as planned, I found what I'd always been looking for in the moment this photo was taken—it was the beginning of a great adventure that continues today.

[Facing Page] **The rime-covered summit of Cerro Torre emerges from the clouds during a day of questionable weather in 2013.** Leo Gambella

Rab
The mountain people.

RAB ATHLETES: SCOTT BENNETT AND TYLER ALLEN
ROUTE: SE RIDGE (FILO SURESTE) OF CERRO TORRE
GRADE: 7A/7A+, WI5, C2, 1200M

WWW.RAB.EQUIPMENT